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Alex J Kim
Interdisciplinary
Collaboration in School
Social Work: Building
Relationships for Ecological
Change

ABSTRACT

School social work is part of social work's historical commitment to seeing people as well as the systems and environments they exist in, but much of today's school social work practice focuses on the clinical treatment of individual emotional and social problems. With growing needs and fewer resources, school social work must find ways of impacting more students through ecologically-informed practice that affects multiple levels of the school environment. Interdisciplinary collaborative practice can be a powerful way to foster ecological change by involving other staff in the effort to craft a stronger school system.

In this study, 11 social workers currently practicing in urban, suburban, and rural school settings in western New England were interviewed in order to learn about their collaborative activities, practice goals, and perceived barriers to teamwork. Their reports were analyzed using grounded theory methodology to develop common descriptive themes.

Findings indicated a wide range of collaborative tasks being undertaken by school social workers at various ecological levels. Of all factors that affect collaborative practice, the degree of relational trust between social workers and their colleagues seemed most significant. Social workers in schools may be choosing clinical service approaches based on the need to develop and maintain trustful, reliable relationships with their colleagues, and that this may be inhibiting the scope of their practice. Hypotheses for further inquiry and implications for school social work scholarship are offered.

**INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION IN SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK:
BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS FOR ECOLOGICAL CHANGE**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2012

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To walk into a school as a grown-up is to enter into someone else's domain: the landscape is filled with the hurts, hopes, dreams, disappointments, imaginings, and isolations that shape the realm of children. Teachers, administrators, counselors, social workers, and all school staff are the guardians and ambassadors of this place, and so I am grateful for the hospitality, candor, and devotion of the school social workers who spoke with me for this study. Their work to bring safety, wonder, and friendship to the world of children lays the foundation for a more just and peaceful world of adults.

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INTRODUCTION

Social workers have a long tradition of coordinated practice with professionals in other disciplines. Social work has often adapted itself to roles that were not being filled in various institutions and agencies such as hospitals, prisons, advocacy groups, and schools. Social workers draw on our own practice literature to guide interventions and programming, but the myriad settings in which we work also require collaboration with colleagues from other disciplines and their own models for understanding people and issues.

School social work is one of the oldest manifestations of social welfare work and is an historic pillar of the overall profession. In many ways, schools are an ideal site for social work practice. The school worker has immediate access to students as well as the teachers and administrators who control the levers of the environments that children must cope with. Schools also routinely engage with students' families, and this presents yet another sphere of influence in which social workers can intervene. Schools are living crossroads of many of the social institutions that form life in this country: community groups, businesses, families, professional disciplines, and governments all play a role in schools. School social work began with a commitment to creating greater links between teachers, families and these various community institutions.

However, results of a series of national and regional surveys of school social workers suggest that school social work has evolved into a more clinical profession focused on helping individual students with emotional problems rather than affecting services and flexibilities in the larger school system (Allen-Meares, 1994; Chavkin, 1985; Costin, 1969; Kelly, Berzin, et al.,

2010; Meares, 1977). While individual counseling, family outreach, and case management continue to be important parts of school social work services, increasing demands and fewer mental health resources in schools have seen social workers fulfilling a wider range of functions. In light of these new realities of practice, school social workers must attend to problems in the school environment if they wish to make lasting impacts for more students and families, particularly those from marginalized communities or social identities (Clancy, 1995; Dupper & Evans, 1996; Germain, 1988).

Active teamwork with other school staff can be one powerful avenue for school social workers to pursue environmental and systems-level interventions. Collaboration helps social workers to define their role more clearly, gain more input into decision-making processes, marshal staff resources towards better service delivery, and challenge practices that may be oppressive or marginalizing for certain students and families (Janzen, 1979; Motes, Melton, Waithe Simmons, & Pumariega, 1999; Pennekamp & Freeman, 1988; Spencer, 1998; Staudt, 1991). Despite the large amount of literature encouraging greater collaboration between school social workers and their professional colleagues in schools, little is written that describes what kinds of collaborative activities are already occurring and what factors constrain or promote this sort of teamwork. The present study therefore uses a grounded-theory qualitative method to ask school social workers about what they do in collaboration with other school staff members and what factors make working with others more or less effective. In short, what are the collaborative practices, opportunities, and challenges present among school social workers on a multidisciplinary school team?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Origins and Development of School Social Work

Social work in schools is one of the oldest manifestations of our profession in the United States, and emerged in response to many of the same social forces that gave rise to other forms of social work in charity organizations, settlement houses, and hospitals. Rapid industrialization throughout many of the nation's urban centers was coupled with an increased flow of new immigrants and their families. Policymakers began to worry about the possible social effects of widespread illiteracy and disenfranchisement among immigrants and the new class of laborers in factories and mills, and by 1918 every state had enacted a compulsory school attendance law requiring all parents to ensure that their children were in schools instead of working (Allen-Meares, 2007). Despite these laws, school absenteeism remained a widespread problem in many industrialized cities.

Local charities and settlement houses were also beginning to recognize the importance of schools in ensuring the long-term stability and success of families. As early as the 1890s, community groups were sending volunteers into schools to provide meals and extended daycare to children of poor families (Bronstein, Ball, Mellin, Wade-Mdivanian, & Anderson-Butcher, 2011). Just after the turn of the century, early social service organizations in three cities separately began to offer social workers who would act as liaisons between schools and families. In New York, for instance, workers at Hartley House and Greenwich House began visiting schools in order to meet with teachers of children in these settlement houses (Allen-Meares, 2007). In 1913, the Board of Education in Rochester, New York was the first in the country to

initiate a “visiting teacher program” which expressly employed social workers to work with families whose children were having attendance problems. These visiting teachers were tasked with encouraging families to obey compulsory attendance laws by assisting them with their basic needs. Visiting teachers in New York City were told to make weekly house calls to families of children who were frequently missing from class and to report on “the various phases of the environmental setting of the child’s life” (Constable & Montgomery, 1985). These programs began to spread to other districts throughout the country as more administrators realized that attendance problems were often symptoms of deeper issues facing families at home (Allen-Meares, 2007; Anderson, 1974). The growth of school social work was also spurred by social workers themselves, many of whom at the time saw that intervening in schools offered a unique opportunity to transform society on a fundamental level. Social workers drew schools’ attention to the individual needs of struggling students and, in doing so, helped implement programs that addressed emerging evidence that children presented a wide variety of learning needs that were often not met (Anderson, 1974). By 1930, school social workers were practicing in 31 states (Allen-Meares, 2007).

The role of school social workers has varied widely since the time of visiting teachers. The rise of the mental hygiene (now mental health) movement in the 1920s and 1930s rippled throughout social work, and this included those who worked in schools. Many began to view their role from a social casework perspective in which the main goal of social workers was to provide emotional support to troubled children at school (Allen-Meares, 2007). Concerns about social workers’ professional identity further complicated the picture, and throughout the following few decades, social workers in schools were practicing under a wide variety of titles including visiting teacher, attendance officer, home visitor, and school counselor (Constable &

Montgomery, 1985). School social workers continue to embody a diverse array of responsibilities that reflects the rapid pace of growth and development in this part of the social work profession (Anderson, 1974). That said, researchers widely agree that since at least the 1940s, the social casework approach to practice has dominated the school social worker role (Allen-Meares, 2007; Costin, 1969). In other words, a form of social work that began with a view towards creating systemic relationships between schools and families has evolved into a more individually-oriented practice that focuses on the immediate needs of individual students. I will return to this ongoing balancing act between individual- and systems-oriented social work practice, but first it is important to consider some of the theoretical conceptualizations that guide school social work. What are the range and domain of school social work, and what sorts of perspectives are social workers meant to contribute to their schools? Most scholars seem to agree that social work's unique theoretical and ethical perspective in schools is grounded in the ecological view of people and their environment.

Ecological Perspectives and School Social Work

The use of the term 'ecology' in human psychology and development was pioneered by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and has since been reconstituted and reformulated by other scholars throughout the many specializations of social work. Bronfenbrenner began with the simple premise that behavior is a function of a person and her environment and argued that the psychological literature had largely neglected the environment in that equation, choosing instead to emphasize the person. To help guide how researchers and clinicians thought about the various factors affecting a human being's psychosocial environment, he identified four interacting systems that comprise someone's ecological setting:

1) The microsystem is the pattern of activities and relationships directly experienced by a human being in a given setting. In other terms, it is the individual and the real relationships in which she participates directly at a certain time and location. A child's classroom and her relationship with her classmates and teacher could be considered a single microsystem.

2) The mesosystem is the pattern of interactions between a person's various settings. While a child might have several microsystems (home, school, daycare), the mesosystem is created by the interactions between them. The nature of communication and collaboration between home and school, for example, creates the child's mesosystem. Relevant to this study, the relationship between different teachers and school staff members are also part of a student's mesosystem.

3) The exosystem is made up of settings that the person does not participate in directly, but nevertheless affect settings that do contain the person. For example, while a child does not go to work with her mother, what occurs at the workplace (such as the mother's work hours being changed, or having a particularly stressful day on the job) can nevertheless impact the child's home and school settings. The parent's workplace would therefore be considered part of the child's exosystem.

4) Finally, the macrosystem is the overarching effect of culture, power, policy, economics, oppression, and other forces that create certain commonalities and trends between different systems. For instance, suppose a child in a high-poverty neighborhood finds that her classroom is overcrowded and undersupplied. This reflects her macrosystem because a combination of economics, politics, and power have contributed to the poor conditions at her school and are also commonly seen at other schools in high-poverty areas.

The ecological perspective provides more precise language for describing schools themselves as well as the work done in schools. Schools can be considered one large microsystem for a child, or a collection of microsystems (classrooms), each with their own relational dynamics and associated tasks (Germain, 1988; Pennekamp & Freeman, 1988). Schools are heavily impacted by the activities of other systems such as local employers and service organizations (the exosystem), and they also are sites where the effects of the macrosystem are quickly evident in the relative affluence or poverty of the school's resources. Clinical work with individuals and groups that targets emotional regulation, self-esteem, and social skills can now be described as addressing only the student's microsystem. Efforts to assess and enhance the school's sense of safety and empathy, promote positive professional relationships between staff members, increase consistency between classrooms, and foster communication with families can be described as interventions in a student's mesosystem and exosystem (Bowen, Woolley, Richman, & Bowen, 2001; Clancy, 1995; Lynn, McKay, & Atkins, 2003; Pennekamp & Freeman, 1988). Social workers in schools can even address the macrosystem by building consciousness among students, staff, and families about the effect of racism, classism, and other forms of social oppression (Dupper & Evans, 1996; Germain, 1988; Spencer, 1998).

The ecological perspective has also resulted in some newer school-specific conceptualizations of social work services. These models promote the ecologically sensitive work by encouraging social workers to think of their practice in the broadest terms possible and to consider ways of extending their interventions beyond the immediate presenting demands of individuals. One ecologically-informed model comes from the Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavior Support (PBS) protocols. These are widely-adopted sets of student

behavior management strategies that aim to improve individual student functioning and overall school stability by directing the entire school system to use a controlled continuum of interventions to respond to the needs of struggling students (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010; Kelly, Frey, et al., 2010). Central to PBS and RtI is the three-tiered model of intervention: Tier 1 includes interventions and supports that apply to all students and are designed to prevent most students from exhibiting problem behaviors and social difficulties; Tier 2 is targeted towards groups of students who need additional focused support to maintain themselves; and Tier 3 consists of high-intensity individual work with students who have identified chronic emotional or learning problems (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010; Kelly, Berzin, et al., 2010). Implicit in the tiered intervention model is preference for more Tier 1 services and supports that improve the school environment for all students and consist of interventions to be carried out by the entire staff, rather than the social worker in isolation (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010; Kelly, Frey, et al., 2010). Individual counseling is reserved only for the most severe cases rather than being offered in general to all students with any level of need. In this way, the tiered model of intervention promotes the ecological perspective by primarily orienting social workers towards preventative interventions for the entire school.

Another important conceptual model for school social work is the clinical quadrant model developed by Frey and Dupper (2005). Here, two intersecting axes are imagined along which school social work services can be placed. One axis is the social worker's target for change, which can include anything from an individual student's behavior to the services and attitudes that form the overall school ecology. The other axis is the person (or people) engaged by the social worker, and this ranges from individuals, families, and small groups to large groups, entire schools, and communities. The axes intersect and create four quadrants of school social work

practice. Quadrant A consists of intervention involving individuals and groups that try to create change in the overall school environment. Quadrant B involves large groups (such as a grade level or the entire faculty) and also tries to change the school system as a whole. In quadrant C, social workers engage individuals and groups in order to change individuals and groups: one-on-one and group counseling fits here. Lastly, quadrant D engages groups and systems in order to change the behavior of individuals: an example of this is substance abuse prevention curricula that are taught to entire schools but target individual and group behaviors.

The clinical quadrant makes explicit the kinds of school social work practice that effectively address all levels of the ecological environment in school. Together with the tiered intervention model, it expands the school social work imagination to include services and programs that both engage more people and affect more systems of influence. School social work training tends to emphasize clinical interventions that target individual mental health and behavior change and often lacks education on working with staff and administration on broader system changes. This may be inhibiting the ability of social workers in schools to operate on systems beyond the student microsystem to implement broad preventative measures (Berzin & O'Connor, 2010; Kelly, Frey, et al., 2010).

These ecologically-informed practice models all seem to indicate that traditional clinical social work with students and families should be only one out of several practice approaches being pursued by school social workers. This tension between providing direct clinical services to children in distress and working on programs and services that improve the school environment for everyone has been a central dialectic in social work for many years. Responding to the rise of the social casework orientation in social work, Bertha Reynolds (1935) said:

It is clear that the contribution of social casework is to supplement the basic public administrator, not to struggle to make up for mistakes of a poor one. If a faculty school curriculum is causing every year thousands of school failures, it would be stupid to engage visiting teachers to work individually with the unsuccessful children. Why not change the curriculum and do away with that particular problem at one stroke? (as cited in Allen-Meares, 2007).

Despite this early exhortation over 70 years ago, an overwhelming amount of literature shows that clinical social casework with individuals and groups is the dominant form of school social work practice, occupying more time and resources of social workers than any other approach. I will now turn to literature that explores reasons for this clinical entrenchment in school social work and consequences for our profession as well as the communities we serve.

From Individuals to Systems: Real and Imagined Shifts in School Social Work

The genesis of school social work in a time of rapid societal change and shifting expectations of schools and families resulted in a profession that has struggled to understand itself (Anderson, 1974). The first national effort to gain a grasp of what school social workers were actually doing in their roles was made by Costin (1969) and has since been followed by a series of national surveys of school social workers and their tasks (Allen-Meares, 1994; Chavkin, 1985; Kelly, Berzin, et al., 2010; Meares, 1977). All of the national school social work surveys conducted up to this point have shown that individual and group counseling services, including crisis management, are by far the most frequently provided social work intervention among school social workers. The profession was once thought to be in a state of transition and redefinition from a individualistic clinical perspective towards a more ecological approach (Constable & Montgomery, 1985; Meares, 1977). However, a greater number of studies express

concern that the dominant casework orientation of school social work seems implacable in spite of numerous calls for reform and evolution (Clancy, 1995; Kelly, Berzin, et al., 2010; McManama O'Brien et al., 2011). Instead of seeing wide-scale changes in the practice approach of school social workers, these studies suggest that the profession is struggling to adopt more environmentally-oriented forms of service (Chavkin, 1985; Clancy, 1995; Frey & Dupper, 2005).

No one has suggested that school social workers should immediately stop providing therapy and counseling. Crisis intervention and emotional support remain important aspects of school social work. However, as a vehicle for sustainable changes in the school environment, direct clinical services are insufficient. By limiting their role to the needs of troubled individuals and families, school social workers run the risk of unintentionally ignoring the underlying social conditions of problematic functioning (Bowen et al., 2001; Costin, 1969; Germain, 1988). Increasing cultural diversity (and potential for misunderstandings), worsening poverty, and intensifying psychosocial needs make the system-wide contribution of social work perspectives especially relevant, and social workers may not be able to address these increasing demands while continuing to hew to clinical casework as their primary mode of practice (Dupper & Evans, 1996; Jonson-Reid et al., 2007). Indeed, some evidence even suggests that individual counseling is among the most ineffective interventions that social workers in schools can provide. In one study of school social workers' attempts to address school violence, individual counseling was rated as both the most commonly provided service as well as the least effective in preventing incidents of violent behavior (Astor, Behre, Wallace, & Fravil, Kimberly, 1998). Group and school-based programs such as social skills training, afterschool clubs, and peer conflict resolution were rated as most effective but only moderately employed among the respondents. In another study of school social work case characteristics and dispositions, direct counseling

was negatively associated with a positive disposition (Jonson-Reid, Kontak, Citerman, Essma, & Fezzi, 2004). While the authors say that this may reflect the severity of cases that actually received clinical services, this finding demonstrates that the emphasis on individual counseling services may be siphoning time and effort from more effective forms of practice.

The relative infrequency of environmentally-oriented school social work may also be depressing the visibility and profile of school social work in general. Administrators and other school staff tend to define their perceptions and expectations of social workers based more on their systems-oriented tasks and less on their private clinical encounters (Bye, Shepard, Partridge, & Alvarez, 2009; Constable & Montgomery, 1985; Staudt, 1991). By shifting towards higher-order ecological interventions and working more regularly with other staff members rather than practicing in isolation, social workers can better define their roles and make a case for their continued presence in schools. This is especially important in the current climate of pervasive budget shortfalls and the propensity of administrators to eliminate services that are not seen as essential (Garrett, 2006). The ongoing national effort to reform ineffective schools also provides a unique opportunity for social workers to contribute their ecological perspective to school design and planning efforts and ensure the continuing presence of social work as an agent for system renewal (J. N. Corbin, 2005).

Many different contributing factors have been proposed to help explain the ongoing dominance of clinical casework in school social work practice. Some have cited the lack of effective social work training, supervision, and professional development supporting systems-oriented interventions in schools (Berzin & O'Connor, 2010; Garrett & Barretta-Herman, 1995). A strong professional identification with direct clinical services may stem from the ways that social workers are trained in graduate coursework, and this may be compounded by local school

expectations that social workers will continue to fulfill the roles that they have before (Berzin & O'Connor, 2010). And yet, recent surveys of social workers find that most would ideally like to practice on a more systems-oriented level but feel constrained by the needs and policies of their schools (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelly, Berzin, et al., 2010). This may indicate that there are factors beyond social workers' control that are influencing their practice choices.

The literature on school social work continues to be mixed on whether the field is moving towards more ecologically-oriented practice. It does seem to conclude that this movement must occur if social work in schools is to remain relevant and valuable today. The literature also suggests that school social workers work in complex institutions where they may not be able to unilaterally perform the kinds of system-changing interventions that they would ideally like. Rather, much of what school social workers do may be mediated by their relationships with other staff members. I will now narrow the focus of this review and examine the place of interdisciplinary collaboration between school social workers and their professional colleagues.

Concepts for Defining and Improving Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Interdisciplinary collaboration is a term widely used to describe any process in which individuals representing multiple points of view and role responsibilities work together towards goals that cannot be accomplished in professional isolation (Bronstein, 2003). Collaboration between individuals goes beyond friendliness and collegiality: it involves real and consequential sharing of expertise and work that, over time, results in durable professional relationships and collective ownership of institutional goals (Bronstein, 2003; Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999). Collaboration occurs between staff members within an organization, but also between stakeholders from various agencies and institutions who have been woven together around a common interest in a client, family, or systemic issue (Anderson-Butcher, 2004). Teamwork and

collaboration are necessary because meaningful solutions cannot be arrived at any other way. The training of teachers, social workers, and other human service professionals occurs in academic disciplines that each look at an issue or problem from their own particular angle. Collaboration is therefore a means of resisting this fragmentation and forming an integrated, collective view of the people and communities we serve (Couturier, Gagnon, Carrier, & Etheridge, 2008).

Many studies in the school social work practice literature argue that when social workers' professional roles are not clearly defined and understood in their buildings, they are less able to work effectively with colleagues from other fields (Pamperin, 1987; Staudt, 1997; Staudt & Kerle, 1987). In this view, consolidating and clarifying the professional responsibilities of social workers will facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration in schools and other settings. On the other hand, a significant amount of literature also finds that insular role socialization and rigid notions of one's professional "turf" and territoriality restrict the flexibility and mutual positive regard required for productive teamwork (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2009; Bronstein & Abramson, 2003; Lawson, 1998; Orchard, Curran, & Kabene, 2005). The literature seems to agree that professional training in all disciplines must promote the real value of perspectives offered by other disciplines in order to set a firm foundation for collaborative practice (Couturier et al., 2008; Orchard et al., 2005). When the appropriate role and professional competence of social workers is understood by other school staff, work satisfaction increases along with an enhanced ability for collaborative practice that does not feel threatening to one's colleagues (Agresta, 2004; Staudt, 1997). Social workers themselves must also take care that they are practicing in ways that appreciate and incorporate the goals and values of educators without short-selling social

work's unique theoretical perspectives and intervention skills (Bronstein & Abramson, 2003; Phillippo & Stone, 2011).

Schools where staff members interact frequently, help one another reflect on practices, and work together towards shared goals are described as exhibiting strong professional community (Bryk et al., 1999). Numerous factors contribute to positive professional community, including the school's size, stability of its workforce, socioeconomic attributes of the surrounding neighborhood, and racial and gender diversity among staff. In their decade-long study of professional relationships in Chicago public schools, Bryk and Schneider (2003) found that the most significant facilitating factor for advancing professional community was abundant relational trust between colleagues. "Trust" incorporates four key elements of good professional relationships: a) respect and genuine consideration for another's point of view; b) warm personal regard and human empathy; c) fulfilling one's own responsibilities consistently and competently while displaying confidence in others to do likewise; and d) displaying a sense of ethical integrity and moral commitment to education and child welfare (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). When members of a school staff practice and value these attributes, social trust is increased and collaborative relationships become more productive and critical. Of all staff members, school principals had the most significant impact on whether their staff members possessed positive social trust and professional community.

The importance of school administration in fostering professional collaboration is a theme repeated throughout the literature. By exhibiting the four relational factors described above, principals can lead their schools toward more collective decision making and greater individual investment in school-wide initiatives and programs (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

Administrators can help guide group-based needs assessments in their buildings that draw upon

the skills and knowledge of multiple staff from various fields (Pennekamp & Freeman, 1988). They can also foster more creative informal collaborative work among staff by clarifying staff expectations and making the extent of collaboration among staff part of how they evaluate the school's overall progress (McCartney, MacKay, Cheseldine, & McCool, 1998; Pamperin, 1987). School administrators may also be able to work with teachers, social workers, and other staff to address structural barriers to collaboration including large individual workloads, insufficient schedule flexibility for collaborative meetings, and the lack of an institutional mission that values teamwork and mutual support (Bronstein, 2003).

Of course, this is not to suggest that school social workers simply wait until their administrators create the ideal conditions for collaborative practice. Indeed, much of the literature agrees that social workers can contribute to the building of initial trust and collaborative relationships in their settings which can then, in turn, lead to more system-wide changes in how staff are encouraged to work with one another. Even in less-than-ideal school settings, social workers can initiate the process of school change by engaging individual colleagues in simple collaborative tasks that build mutual respect and recognize inherent strengths among one's colleagues. Overall systems change may begin with addressing the quality of the day-to-day interactions that school staff have with one another. This brings back the social work tension visited earlier: individually-oriented interventions versus environmental change. As discussed before, decades of practice literature have called for school social work to engage broader ecological levels of influence. I will now consider how greater interdisciplinary collaboration in schools may provide a path towards this shift.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Ecological Change in Schools

Interdisciplinary collaboration is an important gateway to just the kinds of positive ecological interventions that have been called for over the past fifty years of school social work scholarship. Social workers often operate on the periphery of the school system. While this does afford them with significant independence and freedom to practice creatively, it also keeps their contributions and perspective out of school processes that could potentially lead to more systems-changing outcomes (Phillippo & Stone, 2011). The dominance of teachers and the priority of student learning outcomes in schools has led many social workers to practice as “guests” in a host setting (Bronstein & Abramson, 2003). While practitioners should bear in mind the educational mission of schools, they may also be missing opportunities to promote learning by improving the social and emotional atmosphere that students enter into each day. For years, researchers have noted the potential of school social workers to effect large-scale transformation in their buildings by working in teams of teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, and other key personnel (Anderson, 1974; Germain, 1988).

Regular teamwork opportunities to discuss school issues can help turn problems affecting individual students into questions about the school’s services, procedures, and values, and this can reorient schools towards collective problem-solving approaches (Anderson, 1974; Clancy, 1995; Phillippo & Stone, 2006). Schools where collaborative practice is part of the culture are more likely to share collective responsibility for school improvement and therefore seem more receptive to structural reforms in the service of students and families (Bryk et al., 1999). In a controlled school social work service study, social workers in two impoverished neighborhoods in the United Kingdom began collaborating intensively with teachers, administrators, and local community agencies to address problem behaviors and identify students who were at high-risk

for suspension and expulsion. By the end of the trial, schools receiving these services saw a lower overall rate of problem behaviors and actually obtained a net cost savings for the school system because of fewer district outplacements (Bagley & Pritchard, 1998). In the United States, the concept of school climate is receiving increased attention as incidents of bullying and school violence gain media recognition. Social workers should advocate in their schools for more formal teamwork opportunities in order to affect broader and more durable school climate improvements (Hopson & Lawson, 2011).

Social work collaboration with other school staff may be especially beneficial for raising awareness of social oppression and its effect on students, families, and the school system. Social workers recognize the racist, classist, sexist, and otherwise oppressive contexts of the larger society in which our work is situated, and can bring this awareness to bear in both their daily interpersonal encounters at school as well as their political efforts on school teams to implement anti-oppressive prevention-focused programming for the whole building (Germain, 1988). Social workers can also engage directly in staff professional development about racism and other cultural issues, and can contribute critical perspectives on school decision-making teams (Spencer, 1998). The anti-oppressive lens of critical social work is becoming more crucial as schools take a turn towards more rigid and punitive systems of behavior management that may not meet the needs of students facing clinically significant barriers to functioning (Dupper & Evans, 1996).

Interdisciplinary collaborative social work is especially well-suited to ecologically-informed practice because it recognizes that school staffs already possess strengths and knowledge that can be marshaled towards positive environmental change (Motes et al., 1999). Social workers can initiate collaborative assessments of a school's needs and internal resources

that gather the wisdom and perspectives of frontline staff, and this has the dual benefit of grounding social work services in the needs expressed by the people we work with as well as increasing the profile and visibility of the social worker (Pennekamp & Freeman, 1988). By approaching relationships with teachers as a vital resource for change, social workers can address issues on all ecological levels because strategies that are planned and implemented in individual classrooms become part of the entire school's set of practical resources (Lynn et al., 2003). When interventions that were initially discussed and developed for a small set of individuals become adapted for the entire school, the circle connecting individual and systems work has been closed. Social workers have been encouraged to move beyond seeing themselves as the primary providers of social-emotional interventions in schools and to instead support other school personnel in applying these interventions broadly and consistently (Kelly, Frey, et al., 2010). Regular collaboration with other school staff also increases the likelihood that psychosocial and developmental knowledge will be incorporated into future staff perceptions and responses to children, thus helping to shape a more empathic school environment for all (Janzen, 1979).

Even if formal opportunities for collaborative work are not available or are unsupported by the school structure, simpler collaborative interactions with faculty and administrators can nevertheless lay the groundwork for more complex environmental interventions. Social workers can, of their own accord, practice the values of respect, regard, competence, and integrity that foster social trust in schools and lead to greater collaboration (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Indeed, trust has been described as a resource for supporting collaboration:

When teachers trust and respect each other, a powerful social resource is available for supporting the collaboration, reflective dialogue, and deprivatization characteristics of a

professional community. On balance, we note that the dynamic relationship between professional community and social trust is likely to be mutually reinforcing. As the practices of community are enacted, trust and respect should deepen. (Bryk et al., 1999, p. 767)

Social workers can enhance relational trust through simple encounters and interactions that demonstrate respect for colleagues' expertise while also conveying an earnest and reliable effort to be of service (Bronstein & Abramson, 2003; Bryk & Schneider, 2003). I find that this idea instills a great deal of hope for the ecologically-diverse impacts that social workers can have in their schools by carefully attending to the quality of relationships they maintain with staff.

Whether it occurs in formal team meetings involving an array of school leaders or in impromptu encounters with overstressed teachers in the hallway, interdisciplinary collaboration is of prime importance to effective ecological school social work because it both utilizes and enhances the organizational and relational resources of the school setting. Interdisciplinary social work fosters respect and trust while also expanding the influence of social work services by enlisting more staff to help support interventions, programs, and services. In short, collaborative social work practice *is* ecologically-sound practice. Or, at least: it has the potential to be. I will now conclude by examining existing descriptions of interdisciplinary collaborative activities in the school social work literature.

Examples of Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Schools

Several widely distributed cross-sectional studies found that social workers do engage in some collaborative work including professional training, staff meetings, and consultative activities, but the quantitative design of these studies lack precise description of what these collaborations looked like in action. (Allen-Meares & Dupper, 1998; Constable & Montgomery,

1985). While the most recent national school social work survey echoes the finding that collaborative practice is among the least often used approaches, it makes a plea for more collaboration that does not specify what tasks and activities should be pursued. One study reviewed longitudinal data from a Midwestern school district that tracked characteristics of social work cases over the span of one school year, and this study found that 85% of cases involved some form of collaboration with other staff members (Jonson-Reid et al., 2004). Again however, the specific tasks and facilitating factors of collaboration were not described. Additionally, because this study only reviewed social work services involving individual students, it excludes ecological interventions that are not tied to isolated cases.

Several qualitative case studies have reported the results of pilot social work service initiatives in schools that are meant to provide models of social work practice that can be imported by other settings (Anderson, 1974; Bagley & Pritchard, 1998; Garrett, 2006; Hopson & Lawson, 2011; Motes et al., 1999; Viggiani, Reid, & Bailey-Dempsey, 2002). While I will highlight only several of these case studies, they all mirrored some common findings: they all demonstrated that social work services were beneficial to schools, and they also all showed that increased collaboration enhanced these benefits and spread them more widely throughout the school ecology.

The School Based Mental Health Project was a three-year pilot program implemented in 20 rural South Carolina schools where mental health clinicians from local community agencies were placed in schools to provide intensive interventions and programs at multiple ecological levels (Motes et al., 1999). The program's design explicitly encouraged clinicians "to view the entire school community as the client rather than a single focus on the diagnosable youth as the client" (p. 393). Collaboration occurred in various team meetings and school committees, and

was oriented towards the goals of school violence prevention, managing developmental transitions and milestones within the student population, identifying high-risk groups, and for the most severe cases, direct clinical assessment and intervention. While the study indicates that the collaborative services attained high levels of satisfaction from school staff and clinicians, problems with their documenting procedures prevented the authors from describing the collaborations more precisely.

Another study tested the effectiveness of an intervention protocol called “social worker-teacher classroom collaboration,” or SWTCC, in two classrooms in an Albany, New York elementary school (Viggiani et al., 2002). Here, social work interns were placed in classrooms full-time for two days each week, and provided a variety of services including direct behavioral interventions with students, group-based services, whole-class instruction, and occasional home visits. The interns also facilitated weekly meetings with the classroom teacher following a structured protocol that guided collaborative problem identification and intervention planning. While this study was quite descriptive of the collaborative work of clinicians and classroom teachers, it was also seriously limited due to being carried out in only one school and with unlicensed social work practitioners.

The most comprehensive case study of school social work collaboration seems to be that of the Elementary School Social Work Program in Minnesota (Garrett, 2006). This was a three-year pilot program in which social workers were funded and placed in 18 elementary schools, 15 of which had never had a social worker as part of their staff before. The social workers engaged their building administrators in needs assessment and service delivery planning to address multiple levels of the school environment. Over the course of the three-year period, the social workers increased the amount of time spent in meetings with staff, parents, and community

agencies. They worked on a wide variety of issues including student social-emotional barriers to learning, school violence prevention, substance use prevention, and case management needs. At the end of the trial period, the district school board voted to continue funding the social work program. While this study demonstrates the potential of effective collaborative work to effect ecological change as well as increase the desirability of social work services in schools, it nevertheless fails to describe in detail the form and contextual factors of collaboration.

Addressing Descriptive Gaps in the Practice Literature

The existing research on social work interdisciplinary collaboration in schools suggests that collaborative practice may truly fulfill many of the aspirations expressed by its proponents: better systemic assessment of problems, more ecologically-sensitive intervention programs and services, and increased understanding and respect for social workers. However, the literature lacks grounding in the real live practices of school social workers who are already involved in their buildings. The case studies I have reviewed only examine instances of new social work programs, but do not describe the accumulated effects of a career's worth of social work practice at school. The literature is clear that the building of relational trust is a key factor of effective collaboration, and yet it seems to have sidestepped the relational and emotional contexts of collaboration in its rush to develop recommendations for practice. While there are some studies describing the tasks and activities undertaken in collaboration, they attend to neither the structural factors that influence the quality of collaboration nor to the role of human collaborative relationships. This study was therefore proposed in order to respond to these descriptive gaps in the school social work survey and case study literature. In doing so, I hoped to implement my own collaborative intervention by enlisting the inherent strengths, knowledge, and experiences of current school social workers to help the profession understand itself in its own voice.

METHOD

Formulation

This study is a qualitative exploration of the nature of collaboration between social workers in schools and other school staff members with whom they work. Prior studies have indicated that school social workers regularly engage in teamwork with other school staff, but these have lacked details about what this kind of teamwork looks like and what kinds of goals school social workers have in mind when they decide to work with others. Therefore, the goal of this study was to produce some initial descriptions and themes that illuminate how social workers in schools work with other staff members.

Qualitative methods apply well to an exploratory study such as this because they offer a window into the thoughts and feelings which underlie the behaviors and interactions of research participants. By looking through this window, a range of variables and conditions can be identified which help to describe a phenomenon as well as lay theoretical groundwork for future inquiry (J. Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This study employed grounded theory methodology as a framework for collecting and analyzing data. Charmaz (2006) describes grounded theory as “systematic yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (p. 2). The strength of grounded theory lies in its emphasis on the real experience and testimony of research participants as the source for the conclusions and implications of a study – in this way, grounded theory approaches mirror the social work profession’s ethical responsibility to uphold the self-determination of clients.

Sample

This study sought participants with graduate-level training in social work or social welfare (such as an M.S.W. degree) and who currently practice in a primary or secondary school setting in a student support role. The sample included social workers employed by school districts as well as social workers employed by local mental health agencies who work in schools as on-site therapists. The search for study participants was aided by publicly available staff directories posted by many school districts in the Western Massachusetts region. Email solicitations were sent to student support and counseling staff throughout the area, and a special effort was made to recruit from a mix of rural, suburban, and urban community settings. Individuals were invited to respond only if they possessed an M.S.W. or equivalent degree. Respondents who consented to participate in the study were asked to provide professional contacts for colleagues who may also meet the inclusion criteria, and these colleagues were then contacted by email or phone to solicit their participation. This “snowball sampling” technique was repeated until a sufficient number of participants was included in the sample.

This study employed convenience sampling because of the necessity of obtaining personal face-to-face interviews within the geographical region of the researcher, as well as the difficulty involved in finding school-based personnel who met the requirement of having a graduate social work degree. While this form of sampling is not random and therefore limits the representativeness of the sample, it is appropriate for exploratory research designs which seek to describe initial concepts and variables for future inquiry (Rubin & Babbie, 2010).

Participant and School Characteristics

Eleven social workers who practice in school settings throughout the Western Massachusetts region participated in the study. Most (n=9) were employed directly by local

school districts, whereas the others were school-based clinicians employed by a community mental health agency. All had clinical social work training, and all but one had clinical social work licensure. The sample of participants was comprised of ten women and one man, with ten identifying as white or Caucasian and one participant identifying as Latina. Five of the participants were younger than 45 years of age. Three of the participants had been working in their current buildings for at least ten years (mean=7.6 years), and seven of the participants had at least ten years of school social work experience (mean=11.2 years). All but three participants had been practicing as a social worker for over ten years, with six participants having been social workers for over 20 years (mean=18.6).

An examination of collaborative practice is not complete without accounting for both the individual practitioner as well as the social contexts in which she works. Therefore, I also include general characteristics of the schools where the research participants practice. These data were gathered from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education public website (<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>). The 11 participants represent ten specific buildings, with one participant assigned to work with students and families throughout the seven schools in her district. Only three participants were assigned to work in more than one building. The schools represented included five middle schools, two high schools, and three elementary schools. Five of the schools received Title I assistance from the federal government, meaning that they served a sufficient number of low-income families to meet the government's qualifying threshold for special school aid. The schools ranged widely in racial diversity as well as socioeconomic status – two schools were composed of over 90% nonwhite students, and these schools also sustained populations of low-income students above 80%. In the other schools, white students made up the majority with an average of 21.5% of students in those schools being

people of color. Additionally, the average percentage of students from low-income households in these schools was only 29.9%. In contrast with the racial composition of the student populations, staff members in all of the schools were overwhelmingly white with an average percentage across the participants' schools of 91.2%.

Data Collection

Data was gathered using two standard instruments: one was a brief demographic survey which asked participants to state identifying characteristics about themselves such as age, race, gender, and social work training and experience (Appendix C). This demographic data was intended to help describe the sample's social dimensions as a basis for comparison for future inquiries of this sort. Immediately following the administration of the survey, participants engaged in a semi-structured interview about their work roles and responsibilities and the nature of their collaborative practice. Interviews loosely followed a prepared interview guide (Appendix D). Some prepared questions included "What do you hope to accomplish or gain by working with other staff members that would not be possible or as meaningful doing on your own?" and "What changes at your school might make collaboration with other staff members more likely and more helpful?" Participants were also invited to reflect on and make connections between aspects of their own narrative, in keeping with the open-ended nature of grounded theory interviewing (Charmaz, 2006). As the study progressed and common themes began to emerge, these became incorporated into the interview guide in order to promote theoretical saturation—that is, "the development of categories in terms of their properties and dimensions, including variation" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 143).

Data Analysis

Audio data files of the personal interviews with study participants were transcribed and loaded into MAXQDA, a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software program. Each completed demographic survey was also inputted into MAXQDA and linked to the appropriate transcript document. The software was used for all stages of grounded theory analysis, and primarily assisted with the coding process. Coding is the process of “naming” data by constructing descriptive concepts that organize and relate the told experiences and perspectives of research participants (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47). Charmaz (2006) offers the following systematic phases of grounded theory coding, which I have briefly summarized here:

1. Initial coding consists of constructing codes line-by-line (or by another small unit of text) that closely and succinctly describe the phenomenon and action at hand. At this stage, the aim is to construct codes that make a tight fit with the primary data rather than achieving conceptual sophistication. Therefore, initial coding is quick, spontaneous, and provisional.

2. Focused coding is the practice of selecting the most significant or frequent earlier codes in order to group together larger amounts of data and begin making conceptual categories that give shape to the phenomenon being explored. The major task here is to begin establishing code categories that describe data complexly and incisively.

3. Axial coding is the process of, yet again, examining existing codes and aligning them into categories and subcategories. The goal here is to specify how codes relate to one another and, if appropriate, to attempt to describe all possible dimensions and variables in a category according to the data that is available.

4. Theoretical coding establishes relationships between distinct categories that help present an integrated analysis of the phenomenon being studied. Theoretical coding is intended

to construct a sense of coherence between the concepts which have floated up from the data in focused coding and axial coding.

The data gathered from study participants was analyzed according to this grounded theory analysis model. Text transcripts were analyzed line-by-line and assigned initial codes. Then, codes were compared with one another to find common meanings and characteristics between participants and as well incidents of collaborative practice. Finally, categories were constructed to organize the focused codes axially and develop a framework for understanding the nature of interdisciplinary collaboration in school social work.

Analysis of narrative in text is not a normal part of grounded theory method, but others have used narrative analysis in order to draw out the storied nature of human relationships that are at the core of many forms of social experience (Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, & Townsend, 2010). As data analysis in this study progressed, it became apparent that storytelling about instances of work with others was a dominant form of reporting used by many of the study participants. Narrative analysis allowed for these stories to be compared to one another and common aspects of temporality and plot to be illuminated. The use of multiple forms of analysis in a single qualitative study allows for more dimensions of social phenomena to be described than might otherwise be. Thematic analysis and grounded theory help to reveal common themes and the relationship between the themes present in the data, while narrative analysis contributes a sense of story and time that is equally important to the subjective understanding of the work that the study participants are engaged in (Floersch et al., 2010).

Throughout the data analysis process, I was aware of potential bias arising from my personal experience as a classroom teacher at the middle-school level for several years. While I believe my education background did help to sensitize me to more themes emerging from the

reports of the research participants, it may also have served to color my perceptions of the data with my own opinions on what makes school organizations effective or ineffective. The use of computer software to organize, categorize, and review codings may have helped control this bias by helping me to see an overview of which themes were expressed by which participants and the frequency of these instances. Still, one limitation of this study's methods was the unavailability of other researchers to engage in a parallel coding and analysis process so that codes and concepts could be compared between researchers in order to increase validity of the results. Despite these potential shortcomings, the results which emerged nonetheless describe specific aspects of school social work collaboration, and, in keeping with the exploratory nature of this study design, invite others to engage in their own investigations to validate, challenge, or expand upon these findings.

FINDINGS

As expected, the school social workers I spoke to were eager to share their thoughts and feelings about the work they do every day. Moving through these data according to the method I outlined earlier, I found that several major themes emerged:

- the various tasks accomplished by collaborating with other staff;
- expectations of what other staff can offer to the social worker;
- the circumstances of collaboration (e.g. informal encounters, regular meetings, etc.);
- factors that facilitate or discourage effective collaboration; and
- the social and emotional dynamics of collaborative relationships.

I will begin the presentation of these findings by drawing out the various kinds of work that the participants described doing within collaborations with others school staff. This will include tasks ranging from sharing information about individual students to addressing shortcomings in school programming. I will then briefly visit the expectations that the participants had of the school colleagues they work with on these tasks. The level of formality of staff collaborations will be examined along with other factors which either encourage or inhibit collaborative practice. Finally, I will turn to the participants' narratives about the dynamic human relationships between staff members and social workers that form the foundation for meaningful collaborations.

Tasks of Collaboration Between Social Workers and School Staff

Others have asked and responded to the question, "What do school social workers do?" Here I propose to respond, through the voices of the social workers I interviewed, to a slightly

altered version of that question: “What do school social workers do with others?” The reports gathered in this study show that collaborative tasks undertaken between social workers and other school staff members represent the entire breadth of ecological social work practice. The tasks most frequently discussed by participants were those that focused on the needs of individuals, groups, and families – in short, collaboration in the service of traditional casework. The social workers also described tasks that were oriented towards improving the school environment by supporting the emotional health and clinical capacities of teachers and administrators. Some social workers also described collaborative efforts to identify issues with schools’ programs and procedures, and then to devise durable interventions to solve these problems.

Individual- and family-oriented collaborative tasks.

Planning and evaluating interventions and services for individuals and families.

All respondents described collaborative situations in which they worked with other staff to discuss the case of an individual student, review the student’s school, family, and personal history, evaluate the effectiveness of previous interventions, and consider new interventions and services that may help address the student’s unmet needs or issues. Social workers sometimes met informally with teachers one-on-one in order to discuss a particular student and attempt to develop strategies or behavior plans for the child. However, intervention planning occurred most frequently in formal meetings where the social worker was gathered together with other student support staff such as guidance counselors, special education liaisons, and school administrators. Teachers and parents were also often part of these meetings. Meeting as a group allowed participants to avoid interventions that had not worked before and, instead, focus on new ideas that may better serve the student or the family:

We do a go-around about filling in gaps around histories, anything missing. Once we have that history, we do a strengths go-around, and then who in the school does this family already have strong relationships with to build on, and then we look at what services are in place: what has worked with those, what doesn't work- so that we don't suggest new programming or new interventions that build on the same thing that didn't work in the other- you know. So if therapy doesn't or hasn't worked, then let's not introduce therapy again. Let's, for now, think of other things. (P1, February 20, 2012)

Interventions and services developed through collaboration addressed factors such as the student's mental health and emotional regulation needs, additional learning supports and accommodations, referral for educational or psychological testing, the student and family's case management needs, and maintaining consistent communication between teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents. Social workers often reported that part of the intervention planning process was devoted to evaluating whether the plan was working or adjustments were needed. These interventions often involved multiple parties and responsible persons in order to have them effectively carried out. As a result, another task in planning interventions collaboratively was to determine the duties of each staff member involved with regard to a student's intervention plan, and arrange for additional staff members to become involved if necessary:

That's really talking about our kids who are at high risk. So kids who are not coming in to school, kids who are in the in-school suspension room a lot, so- those are the ones that we're trying to put together a plan for, to contain those things. Sometimes it might be kinda reaching out to the family- you know- hearing- finding out what's going on. Um, sometimes it might be just planning- planning meetings for then those families to meet

with the assistant principal, sometimes it's then having that team teacher come and join us so that we do some kind of an intervention. (P3, March 9, 2012)

Identifying students who may need more services.

Social workers reported that they needed to work with other staff in order to identify students who they would then follow-up with later. Social workers usually only heard about a new case after the student had experienced a decline significant enough to warrant the concern of other staff members. School staff would then seek out the social worker for additional support, either through formal channels such as student support team meetings and referral forms, or informally through brief encounters, emails, or often handwritten notes left in the social worker's mailbox or slipped under the office door. This usually prompted the social worker to begin gathering information about the student from other staff and, in some cases, meeting with the student directly to talk about the issues or concerns that had been raised.

Like a student maybe who's doing a free write and it sounds like slightly suicidal. Or maybe something's going on at the house and we're not totally sure. Like— you writing about yourself? You writing about something that you think might be happening for somebody? My job is to interview the student and ask them... Um— so before— before I check in with a student, I mostly will go back to a teacher, if they haven't caught me on the phone, or it's just been something in writing, and then I'll go back and say, “What did you already do? What had already happened? What did you try? Does guidance know?” And then I'll probably check in with the guidance counselor depending on what the issue is to get sort of more backfill of information, cause our guidance counselors have kids for four years, especially if it's an upperclassman, I figure my guidance counselor's gonna know more than I'm gonna know. (P8, March 30, 2012)

The importance of collaborating with school staff to identify students in need of more support was amplified for respondents who were school-based therapists employed by an outside mental health agency. Since these social workers were less integrated into the day-to-day operations of the schools where they work, they relied on informal communication with teachers, administrators, and school mental health staff in order to find students who could benefit from individual therapy. One school-based therapist said that for her, “the school social worker has been my main contact funneling person, and if she becomes aware that there is a problem and that individual therapy would be helpful... she’ll explain to the family” (P6, March 29, 2012). One respondent was employed by her local school district but assigned to work at all seven schools in the town. She also stressed the importance of working with staff in each building to identify students who may need her specialized form of high-intensity intervention:

Being that I’m a district person and not an in-school person, it’s critical for me to work with the schools, um, because they have the day-to-day contact and they have the day-to-day relationships. So I need to collaborate with them around what the best interventions may or may not be. (P11, April 6, 2012)

Determining objectives for clinical work.

Another commonly mentioned collaborative task was talking to other school staff in order to learn information about the student’s behavior, attitude, emotional state, or other needs that would then be addressed directly in a one-on-one counseling session between the social worker and the child. Here, the social worker described how she uses information she gathers from conversations with teachers in order to help students face the negative consequences of their classroom behaviors and take steps to change them:

P2: I'll find out if the kids have been cooperative in class, um, if the kids have attitude with the teacher, you know- is there a connection with that kid or not? Um, you know- that kind of stuff.

R: What- and how does that information help you, you think?

P2: Well, because then I'm gonna go back to the kid, and I'm gonna talk to the kid who's probably gonna sit there and say that teacher doesn't like me, that teacher's out to get me, I turned that stuff in and the teacher lost it. And you know- I'm gonna sit down with the kid and say, "Look at- you know- I talked with Miss Whoever and- you know- she said she's trying really hard to help you get through the class but you haven't turned in any homework in three weeks! What's the deal?" (P2, March 6, 2012)

Sometimes staff members sought out the social worker to tell her about an issue or program a student seemed to be having and request a clinical follow-up. In other situations, staff and social workers conversed about the student and possible interventions or strategies that could be used. The social worker would then introduce these interventions to the student and obtain the student's view or feedback. Social workers often described themselves as trying to support and encourage students to adhere to an intervention plan that had been worked out by other staff:

Um, so then in the classroom, he would oftentimes space out in class, because he's got attentional issues, he's got anxiety, he's got this huge worry about his dad, um, and uh- so I worked with the kid around okay: when you realize that you've actually just spaced out for five minutes, kinda what are you gonna do? And how are you gonna, um, respectfully say, "What?! What did you just say?" (laughs) So helping that kid come up- realize that they've spaced out and then come up with a mechanism for letting a teacher know. (P3, March 9, 2012)

Staff- and systems-oriented collaborative tasks.

Supporting staff morale, mental health, and emotional wellness.

Many of the respondents said that an important part of their work with other staff was to create opportunities for them to feel supported and validated in an increasingly demanding and stressful profession. So many of the issues facing children and families at school seem intractable, and this often placed social workers in the position of needing to support school staff who have become frustrated and overwhelmed by problematic situations that do not seem to change. I asked one social worker about whether it was valuable to work with staff even when a student's situation seemed beyond the school's influence. She said:

Absolutely. It's validating for them... and for me, too. It's like, okay, I feel better knowing that we're working this hard on this child and we feel better that we've tried our best. We'll continue to try our best, but as of this point, you know. We're just gonna keep trying. (P4, March 16, 2012)

The emotionally supportive aspect of regular collaboration with other staff was a theme echoed by others, as well. Staff often sought out the social worker simply because they needed to "let it out":

I think there are other teachers who- or other situations- where people just need to say, 'So-and-so's driving me crazy.' You know, doing this, doing that. And I'll say, 'Oh yeah, I know it's really- what a bummer. You know, it's really hard. So what're you gonna do tonight when you get home? Great, see you later!' And they just needed to kind of let it out. And not even- you know- they just needed to sort of talk to somebody. Um, kind of like a friend. (P5, March 28, 2012)

In some cases, the social worker met with staff in order to help them manage stress or to address other potential mental health issues that may impact their ability to respond empathically to students. Sometimes social workers learned about staff having emotional difficulties through conversations with other staff or parents, while at other times the social worker's own personal knowledge of colleagues cued them to check in with a staff member and offer supportive counseling. By directly supporting the emotional and mental well-being of staff members, school social workers were performing collaborative work that improved the flexibility and attunement of the school environment as a whole.

Enhancing staff skills and awareness through consultation.

Several of the respondents described work in which they helped staff members perceive and respond to students more sensitively by educating them about psychological and developmental concepts, as well as teaching explicit strategies for deescalating or containing students with emotional difficulties. For instance, one respondent said that teachers occasionally asked her to help them respond to students in sensitive situations such as the death of a parent or domestic violence. Another social worker said that she had taught a number of teachers elements of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) adapted to help students notice their emotions and use grounding techniques to contain them. Social workers also discussed child developmental concepts with staff members who were receptive to incorporating this knowledge into their approach towards students. Two respondents also mentioned their role in raising staff awareness of social oppression (such as racism, classism, and homophobia, among others) and cultural differences that may be influencing staff perceptions of students and family relationships. One social worker compared her educational and consultative role with staff to that of an outpatient child therapist working with a child's parents:

Oftentimes, sitting down with a teacher and listening about what's going on and figuring out kinda what's the teacher's part in it, or what's- not doing purposefully to antagonize the kid- but, um, what's the teacher doing that might be escalating behavior? What can they be doing to do things differently, to reduce stress for the kid? So yeah, it's like uh, you know- when you'd have a kid in your outpatient office, where you're talking with a parent about parenting and fit, so talking with a teacher about how this kid's needs might be to- when you have to talk to them about their five paragraph essay, to front-load it with lots of positives and then do a lot of- how to do the work that they need to do in a way that the kid is going to be able to hear it. (P3, March 9, 2012)

Addressing issues with school programming, procedures, and structures.

Most of the social workers interviewed said that at least some part of their collaborative efforts were intended towards identifying problems with the school's existing services and developing environmental interventions to fix these problems. Sometimes the issues identified revolved around students or families who were underserved due to structural or resource limitations of current service delivery. In this example, the social worker collaborated with the special education director for the district as well as several community agencies in order to establish an afterschool homework support club for students living in her city's three main public subsidized housing complexes:

So we were able to provide a homework club, with certified teachers in each of those three, um, complexes on site. So I was able to facilitate getting the space donated, collaborating with the Survival Center around having snacks, um, having the teacher there four days a week doing that two hours a day, leafleting, meeting the families, going door-to-door, we did all that. And that was- that felt really great- to kind of be able to be

creative, provide something that kids needed. The kids loved it, it was somewhere for them to go. It wasn't about transportation, it wasn't about- we're here, how come you don't come? You know- at the schools, where they become very judgmental on how come Johnny didn't stay after school for extra help? Um, so that felt really good, and we did that for, um, three years. (P11, April 6, 2012)

In some cases, social workers helped to identify ways in which the structure of school teams and meetings prevented effective information sharing and solution planning. This meant asking questions about whether there might be problems with how meetings were currently operating that fell short of the school's or the student's needs. Here, the social worker determined that student assistance team meetings were not working effectively due to insufficient structure and guidance for the meeting's workflow:

It wasn't very structured. So- it also, I found, tended to be the place- we work a lot as a school on our school-wide values, and one of our school-wide values is unconditional positive regard for families and students, and that tended to be the place where sometimes unconditional positive regard might slip. And you know- whether it was personalities or just all kind of direct-service folks coming together, that tended to be the place sometimes where there'd be eye-rolls or, there'd be- you know- stuff that can't happen. So, we restructured- and that was a collaborative process over the summer- we restructured it to figure out how do we tighten it up a little bit and kind of raise expectations in there. And so we have now a very structured protocol for how we go through an introduction of a family, how we gather information. (P1, February 20, 2012)

Social workers also contributed their perspective on issues with the overall school climate and consulted with administrators and teachers on ways to improve the culture of the school – this

included, for some, working to implement positive student behavior programs or social development curricula. One respondent said that part of the reason she was hired by her school was because of her strong interest in developing a school-wide homeroom program in which all students meet in small groups with one adult. She was part of the committee of staff members who developed the proposal for this program and played an important role in training staff about the school climate goals of a small-group homeroom and helped rally support for this new initiative:

Well we did a lot of- we did a lot of professional development and in-service training with people, with the whole building. And yeah- there was a lot of negative, um, perception before we even got it rolling... I felt like we needed to go in there and talk about how user-friendly what we were talking is, and uh- people- yeah- some people were able to appreciate the benefits of all that you were gonna get back... And, I think people were eventually able to see that- oh, this is a good thing but prior to that, people couldn't see the social benefits for the kids, as well as for the teachers in the classroom.

(P3, March 9, 2012)

Two of the social workers interviewed were even part of design teams that helped to reform and reorganize their school's teamwork structures. They worked intensively with administrators and community partners to assess the school's capacity to respond to student social and emotional needs, as well as improve upon organizational systems and designs. The examples of environmental intervention described above display an impressive breadth and depth of school social workers' efforts to address systemic shortcomings that impact their schools and the families they serve. Still, there were several respondents who mentioned little or no involvement in this form of collaborative practice.

Intermediary collaborative tasks.

The social workers also described a large body of collaborative practice that did not seem to neatly fall into the categories mentioned above. These tasks were often ostensibly focused on individual student or family cases, but seemed to have an effect that went beyond just the student being addressed. I am calling these intermediary tasks not only because of their place between individual-oriented and environment-oriented interventions, but also because they highlight the school social worker's role as a "behind-the-scenes" agent who often works between multiple parties.

"The same page": sharing information and fostering communication.

Gathering, disclosing, and synthesizing information between multiple colleagues, families, community agencies, and students was the single most often described collaborative task among the social workers I interviewed. While the type of information shared was usually relating to a single individual or family within the school system, I consider this type of collaborative work to be intermediary rather than just individually-oriented. The social workers' efforts to improve perspective sharing and communication between the various professionals in their schools seemed to have a systemic effect in addition to helping the individual case being discussed. It was an effect that several of the respondents referred to as being "on the same page":

I will often get input from teachers around how the kids are doing. I mean- whenever there's an IEP, whenever there's a parent meeting, whenever there's anything coming up- you know, we try to always talk to each other and know- you know- what do you see, what do you see, how's looking for you, how's he in your class, how's he with you, you

know- none of us wants to walk into a meeting and look like we're not all on the same page. And the fact is- we don't wanna not be on the same page. (P2, March 6, 2012)

The school social workers often seemed to be the primary individual in the school who was focused on ensuring that teachers, parents, administrators, and others were all on "the same page." This meant that sometimes social workers arranged occasional meetings with all parties relevant to a particular student's case:

Um, for some kids, I'm also- kids that really have lots of risk factors, so for example that looks like a kid who's got a parent with major mental illness, the kid's also got attendance issues, or it's a kid who's got some self-harming behavior and uh, the family system's very stressed- I'll do face-to-face provider meetings like every six weeks. So we'll meet as a group- kinda parent, outpatient clinic, myself, if there's other wraparound services like in-home therapy they'll come too- so we're all kind just saying "This is where we are, this is what's going on over the last couple of months." Figuring out who needs to do what piece. (P3, March 9, 2012)

Again, while this practice was squarely focused on an individual student's needs, it also seemed to create a sense of common cause and accessibility among the professionals involved, building a more responsive and cohesive system of student support. One social worker described her daily walk around the building to check-in with teachers. While it served the purpose of gathering information about individual students she may need to follow-up with later, she also described it as taking "a load off [teachers'] shoulders":

Before school, I tend to walk through the building and just say 'hi' to people, poke my head in and say 'Hey how are you doing?' Um- kids that I know had a difficult time the day before I'll probably stick my head in or- if a child is having difficulty and I talked

with them yesterday and I said to them ‘I’m gonna give the mom a buzz’ - that’s another thing that’s helpful to the teachers- if a kid’s really in a tough place, teachers are busy, I’ll saying I’m gonna check in with that mom or the dad. Usually it’s a mom. Um, and I think that feels like a load off their shoulders that they appreciate. So I’ll stick my head in and say, ‘Hey, I called that mom and you’re right, things have been tough at home too, so let’s keep it up and see- let’s talk tomorrow.’ And they’re like ‘Okay, good, you talked to the mom, so the mom knows what’s happening.’ So it’s very informal. I’m- it’s a small building, and we talk all the time. (P5, March 28, 2012)

Many of the social workers interviewed understood their work in terms of supporting student success by helping create a close-knit web of responsive, consistent, and empathic adults in each student’s life at school. While the efforts to share information among staff always focused on an individual student or family, this process of communication seemed to leave stronger staff relationships in its wake, therefore benefitting the system as a whole. One respondent powerfully described this process as helping children feel “wrapped by people”:

I want this kid to understand how we, all together- and we have like an amazing network at the middle school that this kid is wrapped by people from the vice-principal, the nurse, myself, the other counseling staff, everybody- is coming around that kid, to help that kid succeed. (P2, March 6, 2012)

Helping staff to reinterpret difficulties with students and families.

The other intermediary collaborative work that staff mentioned frequently was targeted towards changing staff perceptions and narratives of students and families that seemed to leave all parties at an impasse. Social workers tended to recognize situations where staff and students were locked in a power struggle or a cycle of triggers and responses. They attempted to

intervene in these situations by talking with staff about their conceptualization of the situation and encouraging staff to reflect on practices that may be contributing to the student's reactivity. While the social workers describe a wide range of staff member receptions to these conversations, nearly all respondents described this kind of collaboration with staff as an important part of their duties. As was the case with information sharing, these collaborations were always centered on a situation involving one individual student at a time, but seemed to (or at least, had the potential to) alter staff perceptions and expectations of other students in future interactions. Indeed, these interventions served as an important vehicle for staff development and capacity-building.

The following social worker narrative illustrates the intermediary function of this type of collaborative work. The social worker intervened to help a teacher reinterpret her student's seemingly "oppositional" behavior in a way that allowed the teacher to acknowledge the student's difficulties while also holding him accountable for disruptive or socially unacceptable behavior:

You know, for instance, I sat with a teacher yesterday and- and she has a really oppositional and defiant child- and she does! And he's incredibly intelligent- he's my student, he's my kid, too. Um, incredibly intelligent, and he- also this very burdensome sense of shame. And so it's very difficult for him to take responsibility for anything, um to say sorry even- it's just too much for him. Um- if he does something wrong, you know, and he makes a lot of mistakes because he's also impulsive- it's just very difficult for him. So for her, she's thinking: "Okay, he took the white-out and it's all over his hands. Um, clearly it was him, so I had him sit on the chair. And he refused to tell me it was him. And it- then you know- I wanted him to say sorry. Like, this is what you have to do. You have to learn how to say sorry." And I completely agree with her. And I said, "Well okay

- so let's look at it differently. Um, so he's dealing with this sense of shame, he's not going to say sorry. Right now, he just won't. And so how can we reframe this?" ...I gave her different ways- different uses of language she can use with him... It was just really great. It was one of those moments where you're really grateful to be in the position that you're in. She just said, "You know, I- just- I wish that in school they would've like taught us how to like really address these issues and use this kind of language." (P4, March 16, 2012)

Not only does the social worker manage to intervene in the case of her individual counseling client, but she also uses the opportunity to educate a staff member on how the feeling of shame can present in a child's behavior and how adults can respond to it effectively. This type of collaborative work is therefore both an individually-oriented intervention and also an effort to build the capacity of staff and improve the empathy of the environment for all students.

Several respondents acknowledged the inherent difficulty and complexity of these kinds of interventions because they demand that staff recognize their ineffective practices and be open to criticism and different perspectives. They still felt that helping staff members to see a difficult situation "with fresh eyes" was an important part of collaborating with others:

I don't think teachers can always, um, see some of these, you know- quote-unquote- problems with kids, uh- with fresh eyes. 'You again.' Um, you know- 'I put up with this for the first five months, I'm not going to put up with it now.' So it's harder. But if they know that- 'Well you know, there's this piece going on' or- you know- a little bit of that piece- it all depends. I'll ask kids, 'Well, do you mind if I talk to your teacher about this, or that?' And sometimes it's a yes, and sometimes it's a no. If it's a no, I'll say in a general way, 'Well, this kid's got really- some stuff going on- I can't really say, but I

think it's really affecting them.' And it goes a long way- if teachers have a little bit of, of conversation and understanding, they- they're more likely to give a little- have a little bit more fresher eyes with it. (P6, March 29, 2012)

One social worker described a slightly different form of this kind of collaboration where the reinterpretation being offered involved increasing the other staff member's cross-cultural awareness and knowledge of how social oppression may be impacting the student or family. For instance, this social worker described situations where teachers asked her for help with parents who seemed to be unresponsive and unwilling to communicate with them:

[It could be] a teacher coming to me and saying, "Um, I have this Cambodian student and I'm trying to communicate to the parent and it's not working, and I don't know why." So then I'll say, "Well tell me what you're doing." And I'll say, "Culturally, this is- you know- Cambodian families have tremendous respect for educators, and it means a whole lot to have an educator come and visit at the home. They also are very hands off. They believe- and it's on respect- it's not on 'I don't care'- yeah. It's that- you know- you're the expert, I give you my child- I expect- you know." And the teacher's going, "But I need the parent to-" You know- so then we talk about how, in a culturally sensitive way, you can work to engage the family, uh, where- you know- you're acknowledging their view of you as the expert and the teacher. (P9, April 3, 2012)

As in the previous narrative, this social worker both responds to the needs of an single family and also uses the opportunity to increase a staff member's awareness of environmental and social factors that may be contributing to the situation.

Mutual Expectations of School Social Workers and Their Colleagues

The participating social workers consistently voiced expectations that they had of other staff members with whom they collaborated. At the same time, they also expressed expectations that other staff members seemed to have of them. These mutual expectations often set the stage for collaborative work because both social workers and their school colleagues recognized situations in which the knowledge and capacities of the other parties would yield a better outcome than working independently.

Staff expectations of social workers.

The participants reported frequently that their school colleagues expected them to possess and contribute mental health knowledge and skills to any collaborative effort. This often took the form of collaborations during student crises where the social worker was consulted about how to effectively assure the student's safety and emotional wellbeing, as well as how to support other students and teachers who may have been disturbed. Even in routine meetings and teams, social workers were called upon to voice their clinical perspective of a student or family. Often, the social worker was the only person with clinical mental health training at any given meeting. In the following excerpt, the social worker is the only mental health staff at her elementary school and described her intensive collaboration with the teacher and principal after a student's parent committed suicide:

Um, my role in responding to that was a lot of pieces, obviously. I- my first piece was talking with the teacher who came to tell me first thing in the morning. So she and I talked, and got sort of, like, who's on base. Like who's going to do what today. And the teacher was understandably completely freaked out... So there was this issue about helping her feel settled, how is she gonna talk to the class, how are we gonna help this

boy, what are we gonna do with the family. So it was a lot of like who's doing what piece? And um, the principal was involved in thinking about that... I think I would say I was coordinating things, yes. Along with the principal. So she and I were kinda doing it together. And then she- she might say, "Let's do this." And I'd say, "Oh no no. That is really not going to work." Or she'd say, "Okay, we need to figure out a way to talk to the class- what do you think she should say to the class?" And the teacher would be like, "Yeah, what do you think I should say to the class?" And so that kind of thing. And so the principal and I worked together on the logistics, and I'd say I took the lead on, um, who we would talk to first and how we would say good things, and stuff like that. (P5, March 28, 2012)

Social workers also reported that they were expected to have more intimate relationships with students and families they worked with than the average school employee. Staff members often approached social workers if they had concerns about a student they knew was working with the social worker. Sometimes, teachers and administrators enlisted the help of social workers to help communicate with families or to explain the reasoning for a behavioral intervention. In those cases, social workers were expected to employ their special relationship with students or families who seemed otherwise unreceptive. Here, the school-based therapist saw that one of her clients was in the principal's office and offered to speak with him. The principal had been unsuccessful in communicating with the student and asked the social worker to help.

But when I was talking to him in the principal's office, um, I was able to tell him- he said to me, "He was yelling at me." And I said, "Really, he was yelling at you? How was he yelling at you?" "I don't know miss, like he was just yelling." And I said, "Well, do you

remember yesterday when you were on the iPad? Um, it felt to you that the iPad was trying to make you feel stupid. Basically that's what it was. Um, but do you think the iPad was really actually doing it?" And he laughed, because we were laughing at the fact that yesterday he was- you know. And he's like, "No miss." And I said, "Okay. So I'm not saying that Mr. ____ was yelling at you, but could you maybe think that if you had reacted to the iPad, that maybe what you heard from Mr. ____ wasn't really yelling and maybe it was firm talking or giving you clear instructions and boundaries on what you could do and couldn't do?" There's nothing else to do but agree. (P4, March 16, 2012)

The social worker was expected to draw upon her positive rapport and shared experiences with this child in order to help communicate the principal's expectations and reasons for disciplining him.

Finally, social workers commonly reported that they were consulted about resources in the local community that could help support a student or family. This reflected a widely-held staff expectation that social workers possess knowledge and contacts with social service agencies and organizations that served school-age children and their families. One participant reported that her primary role in student support meetings was to offer potential referrals for community-based support and assess whether a student met the requirements for various services. Several participants said that they were immediately sought out in situations that could mandate reporting to the state's Department of Children and Families (for instance, in cases of suspected child abuse or neglect).

Social workers' expectations of other staff.

All of the respondents said that collaborating with other staff was necessary because they had unique perspectives and information about students and families that would otherwise be

unavailable. Many times this was attributed to the fact that other staff such as teachers and educational support professionals saw students much more frequently and for greater amounts of time than the social worker. Social workers expected other staff to have more observational knowledge about a student's academic progress and social behavior, and frequently sought out teachers or guidance counselors in order to obtain this information. As one social worker said, "The kid doesn't walk in my office and say, 'Yup, my head was down for forty or forty-eight minutes'" (P3, March 9, 2012).

Just as some social workers were expected to have particularly strong relationships with students, social workers sometimes also expected the same of other staff. In some cases, social workers knew that a student had a positive alliance with another counselor or teacher and they attempted to enlist the help of the colleague to provide support for the student or to intervene themselves instead of the social worker. For instance, one respondent worked in a vocational school where students formed incredibly strong bonds with their shop teachers, and she worked with them to implement interventions to address widespread cannabis abuse among the student population.

So they would develop very close relationships- mentoring relationships. Some cases- some kids- you know, you were the parental figure in that- coach, if you will- life coach in that child's life, depending on how crazy the families were... So it was really working with- once I was there a while- working with these teachers about how to go about doing this. And preserving the relationship. And some of them really responded to that, and then, were able to implement, you know, a way of uh getting that kid down to the nurse and, you know, having the intervention with the vice principal. (P10, April 6, 2012)

Finally, many social workers said that they worked with other staff because large-scale programs required more effort than they could exert by themselves. They expected their colleagues to support and help implement school-wide programs that would benefit large groups of students. Inherent in this expectation of other staff was the recognition that social workers could only do so much independently of their coworkers. One respondent stressed the necessity of working with colleagues as well as community organizations in order to meet her school's goal of having all students visit a college campus at least once during eighth grade:

We have a goal that every eighth grader will visit a college campus at least once. And so, we can't do that alone... People are really putting their heads together, putting their resources together into- you know- someone might pay for a bus, someone might cover the lunches, you know- it's- we wouldn't be able to do it on our own. (P1, February 20, 2012)

Another social worker described working with a teacher in her building in order to plan and present a school assembly program that would foster student discussion about bullying, social exclusion, and empathy in response to a highly-publicized student suicide that had occurred earlier that year:

It just so happened the year after that student died, um, we were doing a play at the middle school called 'Honk', which is the story of the ugly duckling. And we decided to take some of the kids that were the actors in that and Dr. _____ who is an 8th grade science teacher and I and a few other people put together a whole presentation around some of the concepts of what was the message in Honk, what did you get out of identifying the issues of this one, you know, character who stands out among all the baby ducks as being big and doesn't quack, he honks- and you know, he- all the differences

and how he's not treated well. You know. We basically took the stuff from the play and had the kids perform it in an assembly and broke them all out into groups and they had to identify different bits and pieces and- you know- it opened discussion and it allowed us to kind of process some stuff with the kids. (P2, March 6, 2012)

As these examples of mutual expectations between social workers and their colleagues illustrate, school social workers practice in settings where the assumed role of all parties are, to some extent, already defined. While these expectations can spur collaborative efforts between colleagues of different disciplines, other factors may constrain or even inhibit teamwork from occurring at all. I will now turn to respondents' description of these contextual factors surrounding the collaborative practice of school social workers.

Structural Supports and Barriers to Collaborative Practice

All of the respondents said that working with other staff was an important part of their practice. One social worker explained that while she was not explicitly required to work with other staff or provide consultation, she did so anyway as part of her commitment to quality, ethical practice:

True social work is looking at the child holistically. And so that's why I work with the teachers. I mean, they are part of the whole. I'm a part of the whole. The family's a part of the whole. I need to reach out to the people that are part of this child's world and try to figure out how we can all together collaboratively practice the best effective treatment with this child. (P4, March 16, 2012)

Similar perspectives on the importance of collaborative practice were shared by others, as well. And yet, despite one's personal determination to work constructively with other staff members, several major contextual factors also seemed to affect whether social workers were able to

collaborate as much or as effectively as they desired. First, the nature of collaboration seemed significantly determined by the extent to which one's school supported regular interdisciplinary meetings and expected the social worker to contribute in those meetings. Second, many social workers described a landscape of limited resources coupled with increasing staff demands, and this seemed to have direct consequences for collaborative practice. Finally, most respondents shared a view that school administration and leadership is essential to creating a staff environment that encourages and affirms collaborative efforts affecting both individual students as well as the school environment at large.

Formal and informal collaborative opportunities.

Social workers take advantage of many different opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues in schools. Many of the opportunities are informal: a teacher slips a note under the social worker's office door requesting help; a social worker is walking down a hallway when a teacher stops her to ask a question; or, the principal asks the social worker to briefly stop in his office to discuss a student's case. One social worker who worked on cases throughout her school district said that she made a habit to "schmooze" with main office staff whenever she made a school visit:

I always check in with the office staff because they are the barometer of everything in a school. They know what's going on with the kids, they know what's going on with the staff. So if I can try and schmooze with those folks and get a sense of kinda what they feel is most important. (P11, April 6, 2012)

These informal collaborations seemed to comprise the bulk of collaborative work for most of the social workers I spoke to. By referring to these types of teamwork as "informal", I do not mean to diminish their importance. In fact, the social workers who described these sorts of

collaborations felt that they reflected a sense at their schools that the social worker was reliable, helpful, and truly interested in working on behalf of staff and students. One social worker said that these informal collaborations showed that one had become “accepted” as part of the school’s staff:

Sometimes, um, you can walk down a hall and once you’re kinda accepted at a school, they know who you are, they’ll flag you. Yo- you know- I need to talk to you about so-and-so, this is what happened, um, you kinda like that. Because information’s coming to you. (P6, March 29, 2012)

Most respondents also described another form of collaboration that occurred in the context of structured, scheduled meetings involving a core group of staff as well as other staff who were specially invited because they had a stake in the matter being discussed. These formal collaborative opportunities could be weekly student assistance team meetings with administrators, guidance counselors, special education liaisons, and the social worker. Sometimes teachers were also part of these meetings. Several social workers said that at their schools, they were welcome to attend teaching team meetings consisting mostly of teachers on a particular grade level. These meetings helped a social worker quickly obtain information about a student from all of his teachers at once. Meetings for students classified to receive special education services (such as IEP meetings) were also frequently described as sites of interdisciplinary teamwork. The social workers commonly felt that formal meetings were important chances to hear multiple perspectives about a particular student’s case or concerns without having to find and speak with each person individually. One respondent explained what she found most helpful about regular formal meetings with other staff members:

What I found most valuable was- I have so little time in my schedule to hear from all these folks, and it is so helpful if I have a kid that I'm struggling with- or- just to put- even put the name out and have the nurse go, Oh I just got a note from the parent that said the older brother has leukemia, or- I just- you know. And information that you would think would get to me but often doesn't in a system that's so big and has so many different players. (P9, April 3, 2012)

Several respondents said that they wished their schools supported more formal meetings in order to increase the amount of communication occurring between staff. One social worker said, "It would be great if we had more collaboration time. I mean- that is a problem- that kind of catching people on the fly is not by any means ideal" (P5, March 28, 2012). Another respondent said that her school had reduced the number of student assistance team meetings in order to encourage more thoughtful referrals, but she felt that this had curtailed the collaboration between clinical and school staff, and hoped that the school administration restored regular student support meetings.

An important finding that emerged from the data was that formal meetings seemed more likely to be the site of collaborative efforts aimed at affecting the school environment and system, whereas informal collaborations were overwhelmingly oriented towards individuals and families. One social worker reported being part of a regular committee meeting that evaluated and improved the school's homeroom program. Homeroom was aimed at increasing the number of student-adult connections in response to research findings that greater adult connections at schools were correlated with lower incidences of bullying, depression, and self-harming behavior among students. Another social worker described his experience being part of a "school

redesign” team which addressed various systemic issues affecting students, families and school staff:

Um, part of the redesign was that, um, we were uh- twenty percent of the staff was immediately moved, and then another twenty percent was moved the next year. Um, and that was a big thing- was figuring out where the strengths and weaknesses were within the school. Um, attendance was a huge problem. It was like a gigantic problem. Um- hammering that out. And then a lot of it was just putting out fires and changing the culture of the school... the administrative team was concentrating on like what the day would look like, where kids would sit at lunch, how kids would move through the building. (P7, March 30, 2012)

Another social worker described how her building’s new principal had shifted the agenda of weekly student support meetings towards a more systemic perspective rather than discussing individual cases:

Um, our current principal is much into look at things systemically, so we spend a much smaller amount of the time on kids. And we spend much more of the time on looking at systemic issues, whether it’s uh school climate, bullying, uh, programmatic issues such as uh thinking about phys-ed and how that does or doesn’t meet the needs of kids, um- you know- should it be single-gender classes, should it be- you know- just um- although, those kind of things we only brainstorm one meeting, and then it goes to a subcommittee. (P9, April 3, 2012)

Finally, one respondent described how she had helped design the workgroup structure at her school in order to support progress towards four systemic goals that had been identified in

partnership with staff and families. The workgroups provided the necessary structure and momentum for school staff to remain invested in these goals:

And you know - that's one of those workgroups I mentioned. We've got four goals as a school, as a full service community school. And- each workgroup has to tie directly to one or more of those. So each month, they're revisiting their objectives and moving those forward. (P1, February 20, 2012)

By drawing a potential connection between formal collaborative opportunities and a greater likelihood of effective systems-oriented social work practice, I do not mean to suggest that environmental interventions were not possible in informal collaborative situations. As discussed earlier, respondents shared numerous examples of staff- and environment-oriented work that occurred in brief encounters and consultations with colleagues instead of formal meetings. However, the narratives of social workers who have been able to work in formal groups on systems issues suggest that this format for collaboration creates a greater sense of support and demand for continual examination and adjustment of the school environment.

Decreasing community resources and increasing demands on staff.

Many of the social workers interviewed described district cuts in funding and staffing as major impediments to effective collaboration because they increased the responsibilities of each staff member and reduced the time available for teamwork. Several of the social workers reported that they split their time between multiple schools, and that this made follow-up with staff more difficult. One respondent described what she felt she would be able to do if she were in only one building:

Just uh, if it's a behavior issue, if it's an academic issue, you can keep, um- you can keep sorta doing your rounds. I could go to a lot more team meetings, for instance. Um, and

hearing what they have to say. Um, I could do a lot more observations with kids. I could pull a kid for a quick second, um, and just say- you know- how's this going? Um, at this point what I do is I see kids for about a half a period, and once I've seen them for that week, if they don't have a crisis I don't have time to see them again. I can't follow up with them again. Because I have all these other kids. Um, so that's- that's the difficult piece. (P10, April 6, 2012)

Several social workers also reported that because of insufficient staffing in their schools, they were more often called upon to respond to crisis situations and that this impeded their ability to have collaborative conversations with colleagues. In fact, one social worker I spoke with needed to abruptly terminate our interview after overhearing on the walkie-talkie that a student was being hospitalized. This respondent was eventually sent back to complete our interview after being assured by the school principal that the situation was under control. It seemed telling to me, however, that the social worker felt compelled to respond to a potential crisis rather than being able to trust the capacity of other staff to respond effectively. Another social worker said that she felt increased pressure to focus on crises after the only other counseling position in her building had been eliminated by the district:

It feels now like I am more reactive than proactive, you know... I also notice just the pressure of trying to deal with the kids that absolutely have to be dealt with, and now I'm the only one who can do that, and there just isn't enough time sometimes. It's very difficult. (P5, March 28, 2012)

Another frequently discussed barrier to collaboration was a sense that teachers and administrators were too busy and overwhelmed with their own responsibilities to offer support or accommodation for social workers' interventions and programs. Many of the social workers

who provide individual counseling for students during the school day reported that teachers often balked at having their students removed from class in order to attend counseling sessions. This often resulted in complex negotiations involving multiple teachers and a rotating schedule of when children would be pulled out of certain classes. Some also reported that they sometimes encountered resistance from staff members who seemed unwilling or too busy to provide special interventions for just one student. As one social worker said, “You’re asking teachers to go and do something when they’ve got twenty-five kids in front of them, twenty kids in front of them. You know- and he’s not the only one who needs help” (P10, April 6, 2012).

Changes in policy and social services outside of the school also seemed to exacerbate the sense of stress and pressure felt among school staff. Several social workers said that increasing pressures due to state and federal policies that tied school funding to standardized test results contributed to staff reluctance to cooperate in planned interventions for students. One person said that while most staff recognized that attending to students’ emotional and social issues would help them learn and perform better on tests, they were still hesitant to allow students to miss instructional time in order to receive services:

So you know, the teachers on one hand want myself, the guidance counselor, the school adjustment counselor, the school psychologist- you know, all of us- they want us actively involved to try and help these kids to get them to function better... But, um, you know- they don’t want us pulling kids out of their classes, for obvious reasons, and they don’t want us interfering if a kid’s going to stay after school, they don’t want something else taking their kid away from that... that becomes a whole another level of burden on them when they’re already overburdened trying to make sure no child is left behind, you know? (P2, March 6, 2012)

Another external source of increasing pressure on schools was the sense that social services in local communities were diminishing both in effectiveness and availability, even as social needs seemed to be intensifying. One social worker described her sense that schools were bearing the burden of a widening gap in social services that failed to address the needs of children whose situations had not become severe enough to warrant intervention by child protective services:

As people's needs are increasing and as the services are diminishing, yeah. I just don't know- I think that it creates a chasm of, um, you know- you have the most egregious protective cases, and then you have everybody else. And there's nothing to cross it or to minimize things before they get to egregious protective cases. (P11, April 6, 2012)

A social worker in an urban setting described how the unresponsiveness of social services in the community was placing increased stress on students, families, and the school's support system:

So the police are failing, the hospitals are overwhelmed with emergency room care. I mean, we go there and they're absolutely packed. So many of our families use emergency rooms as primary care- I mean that's a huge problem. I refer kids for behavioral health- um- like just therapy. And yesterday I met with a clinician from one of the agencies and she handed me referrals that we had given to her- to that agency- a year ago. (P7, March 30, 2012)

All of these diminishing resources and increasing demands fostered an acute awareness among social workers that they were asking their colleagues to do yet "one more thing" by trying to collaborate with them to address student, family, and school needs. In this way, these forces seemed to act as a major barrier to more collaboration among staff members.

Administrative support for collaboration and teamwork.

The importance of school leadership in determining a building's priorities, work structures, and staff culture was emphasized by most of the respondents. Some administrators were described as being quite committed to integrating school social workers in various decisions and teamwork structures at their schools. One social worker expressed her view that strong, authoritative leadership created "a sense of security" that enabled creative teamwork:

It's very similar to the dynamics in a family, you know? If there's like a strong head of the family, people- on the one hand, they have the space and the security to get their work done, but on the other hand, sometimes they push against the authority. So, I do feel that we have a pretty authoritarian principal, but I don't- I personally don't see that as such a bad thing. Um, I think it gives the whole Harry Truman thing- "the buck stops here", you know? And I think there's a sense of security in that which gives people the freedom to do their job. So, I'm okay with that. (P2, March 6, 2012)

This sentiment was echoed by several others, and it seemed to reflect a desire for consistency and stability in school leadership. Several respondents shared that they had seen numerous administrators come and go at their buildings, and that each change in leadership also brought a change in educational philosophy and a period of building new expectations for what the administration would support in terms of interventions and programs. One social worker said that the frequent turnover of leadership was a major problem when trying to improve school systems over time:

So the administrators are the ones that move around, and the teachers, being the workers, stay the same. And because of that, the momentum and the vision changes constantly. And so, you're constantly trying to figure out, what does your school support? What

does your district believe in? Where are we going? You know, how- what's their learning curve so that they catch up to what the problems are that have already been identified but have gotten lost? (P11, April 6, 2012)

Sometimes school administrators were seen as essential to gaining (sometimes forcing) general staff support for interventions and programs that social workers had developed in collaboration with colleagues. The social worker who had worked with a committee to develop a school-wide homeroom program reported that an administrative directive requiring teachers to participate was necessary for the program to be implemented at all. Only after staff began to see firsthand some of the social benefits of the program did some colleagues begin to express more active support for homerooms.

At other times, however, administrators were described as not being supportive enough of social workers' efforts to work with teachers and other staff in the school. One social worker described a sense of missing accountability for teachers who refused to respond to the social worker's recommendations for students with emotional and social difficulties:

There are- sometimes there are, um, egregious things that a teacher does, and yeah- I'll, uh- you know- I'll certainly share them with my administration, but then it gets- yeah but- the behavior might get raised, then a teacher might be a little bit more aware, but- you know- I would say that it's not a large number, you know. It's a very small population, but sometimes that thing happens over and over and over again, year after year. (P3, March 9, 2012)

Another respondent described how an administrator unilaterally cancelled an intervention that she had worked on with teachers and guidance counselors to address a student who often had self-regulation difficulties in class:

And um, you know- [the vice-principal] came over to me the other day- you know- “I nixed her morning check-ins, I nixed her coming down to guidance whenever she feels like she’s gonna blow up, you know.” He just like- and so I went and spoke with him and I said, “Look- I mean I feel like- you know- you’ve got your discipline piece, I don’t step into that. I feel like you stepped into my counseling piece and really haven’t spoken to me first about what your ideas are.” And- things happen on the days I’m not there, which frustrate him. And so he just decides- you know- this isn’t working because she used it for the wrong thing, rather than saying, “How can we make this work without her abusing the system?” (P10, April 6, 2012)

This social worker felt that her administrator had not adequately supported her efforts to consult teachers and implement supportive interventions. Instead, the vice-principal in this case became frustrated with what he perceived to be an ineffective solution and dismantled it on his own accord. The social worker said that while she was annoyed by his response, she ultimately was more concerned about preserving future opportunities to work together with her administrators and other colleagues:

At my age, Alex, that crap doesn’t bother me anymore. I just can’t be bothered with that silly bullshit. I’m more like, Let’s work together. We’re collaborating for the success of the child. I want your input, why don’t you want mine? You know- why aren’t we working together? So I’m not stepping on toes. (P10, April 6, 2012)

This social worker found herself confronted with a tension between pressing for the intervention that she felt was most effective and maintaining a collaborative relationship that she would need to draw upon in the near future. This interpersonal dynamic experienced by the social worker

was described by nearly all participants, and it directs my attention to the final major area of findings from this study.

The Relational and Emotional Context of Collaborative Practice

Social workers and their school colleagues formed overlapping and interwoven human relationships over the course of the months and years they worked together. Some of these relationships were suffused with trust and respect, facilitating effective and positive collaborative experiences. Others seemed marked by frustration and suspicion, discouraging the social worker from reaching out and working with certain staff members. Relationships between staff took time to develop, and social workers invested significant time and effort into building connections with colleagues as well as their own reputation in the school. Often, this consisted of recognizing and validating staff frustrations and stress while continuing to offer sensible solutions. The maintenance of positive regard for staff, along with a persistent focus on meeting the needs and goals of colleagues was paramount in developing one's position as a helpful resource at school. I have chosen the term "relational" to refer to these social, emotional, and interpersonal factors of collaborative practice among school staff. Relational factors were not static, but changed and developed over the course of one's tenure at a particular school. This meant that with the passage of time and shared experience, a social worker's collaborative practice changed to adapt to shifting emotional and interpersonal dynamics. I will now turn towards each theme that emerged with regards to the relational aspects of collaboration.

Staff attitudes towards the social worker's perspective.

The social workers reported that their colleagues held a wide range of attitudes and receptivity to their thoughts and suggestions. Several respondents shared that while many staff members were eager and enthusiastic for fresh advice, others were less open to their perspective.

One social worker described her relationship with a particular teacher as being especially productive because this teacher was “thirsty” for new approaches and had the motivation and energy to implement them:

You know, they’ll talk about- you know- how they feel, and if I- and I’ll talk about my perspective- so we’re talking about two different perceptions. And oftentimes it’s helpful for the other person. But um- I mean- this particular teacher was just sort of thirsty for it, right? And it doesn’t mean that another teacher isn’t. It’s just, for them it’s like- you know- I have so much to do, they’re so overwhelmed that this is just gonna take so much longer. (P4, March 16, 2012)

Another social worker described a range of teacher reactions in terms of their level of commitment to trying the approach she suggested:

So it’s- you know- it’s a combination of ‘Yes I really wanna hear it’- you know, you feel like yeah, they’re on board, they wanna implement it. Um, and I think some of them do. But then they’ll say- well he’s not doing X, Y, and Z. You know- so you’ll get some of that feedback where they’ll wanna see more from him. Um, and then you’ve got the teachers who just won’t try- nope- okay this isn’t going good- get rid of it! You know- they won’t try to- you know- and just put a parameter on it. (P10, April 6, 2012)

Many social workers also reported common ambivalence and resistance towards clinically-informed interventions and strategies among teachers and administrators. Several respondents said that they were described by certain colleagues as “spoiling” struggling students through their empathic student-centered approaches. One social worker described a teacher who rarely asked for assistance or consultation because she felt that excessive empathy was ineffective for managing student behavior:

For [this teacher] it's like you know- [the kid's] so cute, and that's why people are gonna coddle him and whatever. Um, and she's like nope nope nope. "I hold him accountable, he needs to do what he needs to do, and so be it." (P4, March 16, 2012)

Several social workers also discussed the difficulties of working with staff, and some teachers in particular, who expected the social worker to "fix" a child or stop disruptive behavior without addressing ways in which the teacher's practices might be triggering or contributing to the child's distress. One social worker said she sometimes felt unable to intervene in a child's classroom environment because some teachers were not open to this kind of discussion:

Some teachers aren't interested in two cents... they want me to meet with a kid, and they know that the kid is meeting with me, and- um, but they don't want to really think about how they might- could do something different. So, in those cases, oftentimes- I feel like I can't really intervene in the classroom sense directly with the teacher, so I might talk with a kid about learning how to be less reactive to the teacher when the teacher raises their voice, or when- so that they're a little more open to criticism, things like that. (P3, March 9, 2012)

Resistance and ambivalence among staff were attributed to several different factors. Some social workers said that certain colleagues became easily frustrated when interventions or strategies did not appear to work immediately, and that this made them less apt to accept recommendations in the future. Others recognized that teachers often had their "own way" of handling situations and were reluctant to change practices which worked for them. Some respondents said that they were viewed with outright suspicion and distrust by some of their colleagues: were the social workers trying to help students, or were they there to criticize the staff member? As one social

worker put it, “I think they worry about who I’m observing” (P10, April 6, 2012). I will return to the theme of trust later on in this section.

Maintaining positive regard towards staff.

Social workers encountered many different attitudes towards their ideas and collaborative efforts. While some colleagues were reportedly positive and trustful, others seemed ambivalent at best and even hostile at worst. Nevertheless, all of the social workers interviewed stressed the importance of maintaining a respectful stance towards school staff as part of building positive collaborative relationships with them. This included finding sensitive, non-threatening ways to have difficult conversations with staff about ineffective or potentially hurtful practices that were impacting students. One social worker described certain interactions with teachers as “muffins,” meaning that she would bring muffins and coffee to a meeting with a colleague because she knew that the conversation would make the teacher feel vulnerable. Another social worker said she avoided taking on the role of teaching her colleagues about mental health concepts unless she was asked to. She said, “I don’t patronize the staff. They’re pretty good. I mean- I feel much more collegial with them. If they want to know something, they’ll ask me, in which case, yes, of course I’ll tell them” (P2, March 6, 2012).

The majority of respondents expressed a great deal of empathy for the stressful demands of working in a school setting. They often framed their interactions with other staff members within the understanding that their colleagues at school were under a high degree of pressure to manage struggling students and oversee day-to-day operations, all while also supporting academic achievement as measured by state exams. One social worker described how the high-pressure environment of his school made teachers feel especially vulnerable when reflecting on their practices:

I do a lot of observing teachers, and talking to them after about specific interactions with kids. And like looking at them and saying- “This isn’t working for you, what- let’s go back to this specific thing and how do you think you could’ve moved through it in a way that didn’t escalate the child, which would have helped him complete his work?” And a lot of times- sometimes it’s tearful, you know? Sometimes- like- it’s such a high-pressure environment, and there’s such an emphasis on improving test scores- even the slightest criticism is, um, is received in a really vulnerable space. Um- but- we work on it and we talk about it and we get through it. I mean people want to be better teachers, and they want that class command. (P7, March 30, 2012)

This social worker seemed able to build collaborative relationships with teachers despite high levels of stress because he recognized the pressure that teachers were feeling and incorporated this recognition into how he interacted with staff.

Social workers were better able to accept and understand the resistance and ambivalence they sometimes encountered by empathizing with the stress and pressure that their colleagues were often experiencing. One social worker described her attempt to help a teacher recognize that she may be triggering students in her classroom with posttraumatic issues by giving extra snacks to some students but not others. The social worker recommended that the teacher stop giving out extra snacks, but the teacher felt that this was an important part of her relationship with students.

And two weeks later [the teacher] came to me cause the kid was doing the same thing. And I said, “I gotta tell ya- I’m going to say the same thing I said before. I really think you should give that a whirl.” And she just didn’t wanna do it. So, um- or she thought she was doing it in the way she could. But that- it’s hard. You know, it’s hard to ask

people- I mean- it's hard for any of us. I wouldn't like that if someone was saying things- it makes you feel vulnerable, um, you know. And when you're a teacher, you know, everyone sees what you're doing... You're very exposed! And so you wanna have kinda empathy for that as well as the fact that everyone's doing the very best that they can. And some people- the framework you offer makes sense to some people and it doesn't to other people. And ultimately that's their choice, right? (P5, March 28, 2012)

Here, the social worker maintained her positive view of this teacher by interpreting her reluctance to follow a recommended approach as difficulty with being open and vulnerable to criticism. This allowed the social worker to retain a collegial working relationship that did not foreclose upon future collaborative opportunities. Of course, social workers were often frustrated by the resistance they met, but for the sake of students as well as staff harmony, they tended to choose alternative ways of addressing the issue rather than seeking ongoing conflict. One respondent described this as "picking battles":

Sometimes to be honest I feel like I can pick my battles. And so if I have a- so if I have one person in the system that I feel like I'm not making headway on- yeah, I'll cut them loose and go intervene with another teacher on that team. (P3, March 9, 2012)

Another social worker described her respect for colleagues emanating from her own past experience as a classroom teacher and the firsthand knowledge of how difficult the work was. She fulfilled her role as consultant and resource for staff while honoring a boundary between their competence and self-determination as professionals and her own perceptions and clinical opinions:

I honor, like I respect teachers. The first thing for me is I want to honor the way that you teach, I want to honor you as a teacher, and honor your classroom. And there is no way

that I'm gonna ever say to you- you know- this is what you're doing... So I share my thoughts, um, I share my perception. If they want more information, I will totally be there for them. Um, I will totally help them- I mean- offer it to them. I'll be here if you need help, you know, if you want to talk about this again. But if they're not receptive in that way, then so be it. And that's totally okay with me. (P4, March 16, 2012)

While maintaining a positive regard for fellow staff seemed challenging and frustrating at times, it also appeared vitally important to preserving productive and mutually receptive relationships between social workers and their colleagues.

Becoming known as a helpful, reliable presence at school.

One of the respondents quite succinctly expressed her approach to building lasting, trusting relationships with her school colleagues: "How can I be helpful? Like what can I do? How can I make this easier? How can I make this useful?" (P8, March 30, 2012) The desire to be "helpful" and "useful" to one's school and fellow staff members was shared by every respondent in this study. Many of the social workers shared the view that their role in schools was, ultimately, to support the educational mission and help children be available for learning. This meant that the goals, needs, and strengths of the school staff were often held firmly in mind as social workers did their jobs.

Social workers often adjusted their services and schedules to better fit the needs of teachers and classrooms. Several respondents described careful efforts to be sure that students were taken out of class for counseling at the least disruptive times possible. This often meant taking time to communicate with teachers about each student who needed to be seen individually:

I try to give teachers a heads-up- like I try to say in the morning or in between classes, like I try to call and say, "Would it be okay if I called into your next period class to see

so-and-so? What works better for you, should I call at the beginning or halfway through?”

Um, if I hear them go, “Well...” I’ll say, “Oh were you having a test?” And they’re like,

“Yeah I was planning on it!” “Okay, it’s fine, it’s fine, it’s fine!” (P8, March 30, 2012)

Another social worker described a laborious effort to implement school-wide DBT-based emotional regulation strategies that teachers would find acceptable. She coordinated an effort to survey teachers about what types of strategies they felt would be least disruptive in class, and then designed a program manual based on the feedback she received. She said, “Definitely with some of the teachers who were skeptical became interested. Um, and I think some teachers felt like it was a- kind of like a one-more-thing kinda deal, which is understandable. But, by and large, I think the reception has been good” (P2, March 6, 2012).

An important part of establishing a helpful presence in school was being accessible to staff who needed assistance. Most of the respondents said that they made efforts to be reachable by teachers and administrators throughout the day and welcomed communication via email, telephone, in-person encounters, or even handwritten notes:

And I’ve told people- when I got here people said what’s the best way to reach you, and I said, “Grabbing me or a note in my box.” People will put a note in my box. So say someone will put a note in my box and say, “_____, I need to talk to you about so-and-so today.” And I go and find them. And- the deal I have with teachers, which I set explicitly and now people- you just know it over time- if someone says they need to see me, I see them that day. (P5, March 28, 2012)

In this example, the social worker made a commitment to respond to teacher requests within the same school day, and this helped establish her presence as a helpful and trustworthy colleague. Another social worker reported that his predecessor had been notoriously difficult to reach by

staff, and was often found napping in her office. When he took over the position, he began to increase the profile of the school social worker by making regular rounds throughout the building and responding quickly to staff needs. One respondent gave the following advice for school-based therapists who were just starting out in a new school building:

Put your face out there. Hang out- be- go to the office, um, talk with- if you need to talk with the principal, vice-principal, um- best-friend the guidance counselors, um best-friend the special-ed coordinator, because they'll tell you when the IEP meetings are that you can go to. We don't always get that- you know- information to us. "Oh yeah! I forgot you're working with that kid." That happens a lot. So my advice to all is yeah- they become your BFFs. (P6, March 29, 2012)

Becoming visible to school staff and maintaining frequent communication with them was necessary for ensuring that important information and collaborative opportunities did not bypass the social worker.

Many social workers described instances where they responded directly to requests for help from other staff, even when the type of assistance fell outside of typical social work duties. One respondent often helped students to organize their binders and find missing assignments they had never submitted so that the student could finally receive credit. Another person helped a student get started on a writing assignment by helping him notice instances when his attention would begin to wander. In one instance, a social worker escorted a student to the gymnasium and threw some balls for him to hit back in order to provide an outlet for the student's aggression. In another case, a social worker helped a teacher communicate with a student who was refusing to apologize for disrupting the class. As these examples show, responding promptly and flexibly helped social workers build their presence in schools as a trustworthy staff partner.

Social workers also rendered assistance to teachers by making phone calls to parents on their behalf. They acted as liaisons between staff and families, and this helped to alleviate a significant amount of stress that teachers and administrators were under. One social worker described her unique role in managing conflict between schools and families because staff members were usually hesitant to jeopardize their relationship with a parent. Because she was not based in any one school building, she felt she could help colleagues by acting as a lightning rod for conflict with parents:

I think that they need to maintain some sort of relationship over time whereas my relationship can be more disposable. Um, so I can kinda do some of that hard work and let people- if people are going to be, um, angry about an intervention, let me be the person that they're angry at, so that they can sustain the relationship and I can kinda be the person who, um, can just do that heavy lifting at that moment, you know, for the team.
(P11, April 6, 2012)

All of these instances are examples of social workers making themselves available to help and support the needs of their colleagues, and while some of these examples seem to fall outside the realm of social work practice, they all seemed to play an important part in building positive relationships with staff that then led to other collaborations.

Developing trustful relationships over time.

The relationships, interpersonal knowledge, and reputation for helpfulness that social workers accumulated over time in their schools was critical to their ability to practice collaborative work. This process took considerable time and effort. One social worker described the development of collaborative relationships occurring for a new school-based clinician she supervised:

But it took her several months. Like she'd go in there and she said people would kinda look at her, like, you- who are you? And then all of a sudden she had another clinician that had been there for years. They were walking around, and they became associated... Oh! Now we know who you are... People were approaching her more, um- people were "Oh I have another case for you." ...It literally- a light turned on and then she became a clinician. (P6, March 29, 2012)

Here, the social worker was not known or trusted immediately – in other words, she did not, at first, have a presence at school. However, starting with the other school-based clinician, the new social worker began to form relationships and develop an identity.

Several social workers described the difficulties of working in a setting where they had not yet developed a sufficient level of rapport and trust with their colleagues. One clinician was in the fifth year at her school and still felt that a significant number of colleagues remained unreceptive to her help.

After four years, I still feel like people are still totally checking me out, um, I would say- I would- I feel like half to three-quarters I feel like people trust me, but not completely... Yeah, in the first year, people wouldn't always acknowledge me in the hallway, I mean- yeah. It's a hard system to get. And I think people are checking- check me out too like am I allied with the administration? And it's- with some people that's an issue, other people it's not an issue. (P3, March 9, 2012)

Another respondent said that even though she had transferred to her current building from another location in the district, she needed to "re-earn" the trust of the school staff. She attributed the reluctance of her colleagues to invest trust in new staff to the high rate of turnover among recently hired employees.

No, you know- in a school- my experience in a school is nobody trusts you at all the first year. They don't even really spend much time getting to know you the first year because they're so sure you're not gonna be there the next year. And then the second year they start to take notice of you. Um, and when I started here, I think I was two days a week. I'm now four days a week. Um, yeah- I was two days a week here, and one day a week at a- the alternative high school. So, yeah- I don't- I don't think it transferred over. I think I had to re-earn it all. (P9, April 3, 2012)

One social worker said that in the beginning years of her work at the school, her colleagues seemed to be assessing whether she was "sane" and able to offer constructive help to students and staff:

And people were kinda curious- like teachers came by a lot of times- teachers came by- like, who was I, what did I do- they kinda wanted to get a sense of sort of my own sanity, I think? Like how helpful can you be, how sane are you? Um, and so little by little people started sort of referring, like, "You know you might wanna see this student." And they were just kinda like waiting- what was I gonna say? What was I gonna do? (P8, March 30, 2012)

The social workers also described efforts that they made in order to start building better relationships and deeper levels of trust between themselves and their fellow staff members. As discussed earlier, many social workers began building their presence in schools by becoming easily accessible to staff concerns and responding quickly and effectively to them. For some, this also took the form of putting in additional hours of work beyond what was required, and earning the respect of other dedicated staff members by showing that they, too, were committed to supporting the school and its students. One social worker said, "I just think, like, if you're

gonna be here, and you're gonna make the investment and you're gonna put the time in, you really have to push all your chips into the center of the table and let's like make some change" (P7, March 30, 2012). He reported that his school's principal decided to use part of the discretionary budget to hire two additional social workers after seeing the positive impact he had on the building. Some social workers reported that they began building relationships by identifying other staff who shared and appreciated their view of students and school issues. One person reported that she was able to collaborate on a new district-wide service because she and the district's special education director held a similar perspective on how to prioritize spending:

Who in our community are we including and who are we leaving out? And people hadn't really thought about this. And they can't- um- visibly think about it, but um, _____ was great. He thought about it. And he said, "I'm using my money to do this, this is what I believe what you're saying.... You know, we can do that. Yeah, that population, we need to bring that to them." And so we did. He said, "Here you go, this is the money, this is what I can afford, this is how many hours, you figure it out." And we did, and it was great. (P11, April 6, 2012)

Another respondent gave some deceptively simple guidance on earning the initial trust of colleagues: "Say things that make a lot of sense" (P9, April 3, 2012).

Once social workers had developed a certain degree of professional trust and relationship with their colleagues, collaboration with others seemed to become more natural and effective. Social workers who had more experience in a building seemed more likely to know how much support they would receive from other staff around a particular intervention and could plan strategically about how to address an issue:

And sometimes it can be a strategy of who's best to go to first. Who's going to be most effective? Because you can have some people in the system that you tell and it stops there. Or, it's just not gonna work. And then, you got other people who are like- they really know how to work the system, they're really great collaborators, um, they won't take 'no' for an answer, cause sometimes you gotta go that route. Um, so you gotta think- what do I want to get out of this? Who's my best ally in this? And then- who can take it from there? (P6, March 29, 2012)

Social workers with a high degree of interpersonal trust in their schools also seemed to enjoy less resistance and confrontation from staff when they needed to discuss interventions or new services for students. One respondent shared that because of her strong relationships with her school's staff, she was able to cue others to direct more attention to a particular student with emotional or social difficulties without needing to divulge personal details about the student's life or family:

And, they've gotten to know me well enough that- like I can say to them- things are really hard for this guy at home. And the teachers get that. They don't say 'Well what do you mean? Give me the details.' And so I think we've sort of figured out how to talk in a way- and that's because over the years we've built up relationships so they have some sense of probably what I mean when I say that- which feels good for me because I don't want to be sharing all those details, you know? (P5, March 28, 2012)

Finally, once social workers had developed a strong, trusting relational presence in their schools, they seemed to find that important information about students, requests for assistance or consultation, referrals of high-needs cases, and other collaborative opportunities would begin to flow towards them. Many respondents said that they noticed a point when they began to be

sought after in their schools for help or support. Some said that staff colleagues even began to refer each other to the social worker. One person said that when she first started in her building, her office door “was able to be open.” Now, 21 years later, she received so many staff requests and invitations for consultation that she needed to set more boundaries about her work and, in effect, leave her door closed (P8, March 30, 2012).

The relational and emotional context of collaborative practice was an important thread throughout the narratives told by the participants in this study. It showed that the social workers were not simply interchangeable parts of their school systems, but rather, they sought to build real and meaningful relationships with their coworkers that could form the basis of collaborative work. Some social workers had found that the building of relational trust and school presence was more difficult than anticipated, but all seemed to agree that strong relationships among colleagues was an important facilitating factor of collaborative practice. Indeed, some of the most difficult forms of collaborative work—that is, those involving a degree of potential conflict and personal vulnerability—necessitated that the social worker be highly attuned to the quality of their relationships with the colleagues they were hoping to affect.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Analysis of Collaborative Tasks

The school social workers in this study were involved in activities along the entire spectrum of social work practice. As presented in the literature review, Frey and Dupper's (2005) clinical quadrant model provides a useful framework for organizing the multitude of collaborative tasks reported by the participants. I must stress that not all collaborative work was the same: even when social workers engage other staff members, the aim and result was not necessarily ecological change. I found that most of the collaborative work described by the participants fell under quadrant C – that is, it was geared towards gathering information and developing interventions targeted towards changing individual student behavior and learning. These collaborations included identifying students in need of clinical support, gathering case information from other staff to inform the clinical picture, and planning behavioral interventions meant to reinforce student change. While these tasks did involve multiple collaborative partners, they were limited to supporting the social worker's clinical casework with individual students and families. This finding was expected given the large body of evidence showing that student and family casework approaches have tended to be the dominant form of school social work practice for quite a while (Allen-Meares, 1994; Astor et al., 1998; Costin, 1969; Kelly, Berzin, et al., 2010).

A large number of collaborative tasks also fell under quadrant A, meaning that they engaged individuals and small groups to target change in the school ecology. I include here some social worker collaborations with individual staff members that occurred on an informal or

impromptu basis. These collaborative encounters sometimes helped draw a teacher or administrator's attention to the effect of their own practice on students in the environment. By engaging colleagues in difficult conversations about problematic aspects of their own behavior, school social workers helped to craft a more empathic environment for children. At other times, social workers worked with individual staff members to discuss ideas for new programs or changes to existing services that helped the school system to meet the needs of a greater range of students and families. School social workers also helped to increase the psychosocial capacity of staff members by providing emotional support and validation in difficult circumstances as well as occasionally educating colleagues about psychological and developmental concepts relevant to work with children and adolescents. Some quadrant A tasks also occurred in the context of formal meetings such as student assistance teams and leadership teams in which individual student issues were sometimes translated into interventions adopted by the entire school.

Tasks typical of quadrants B and D were less present in the responses of the participants. Some social workers reported that they intermittently conducted professional development trainings for staff members on topics including school climate and child abuse reporting requirements. Others were also involved in leadership activities and coordinated school-wide programs in conjunction with administrators. Committee meetings were sometimes used as a place to raise issues with the school system and arrive at formal decisions how to adjust programs and services. These are examples of quadrant B tasks that engage large groups or systems within the school in order to create change in the overall environment. Quadrant D tasks engage large groups of students in order to foster changes in student behavior, and there were scant examples of collaboration that fit here. One social worker described her regular teamwork with the school's health teacher to co-facilitate lessons about substance use. The other social

workers whose responsibilities included teaching social skills or substance abuse prevention programs usually did so without working actively with other staff members.

As described before, some social work collaborative tasks seemed oriented towards both individual students and staff members at the same time. I described these tasks as “intermediary”, and I find that they also seem to straddle the boundaries between different parts of the clinical quadrant model. For instance, the sharing of information between individual parties (such as between different teachers, or between teachers and administrators) is often geared towards developing more complete case knowledge about individual students, but it also helps to foster more openness and transparency between multiple parts of the school system. In this way, social workers who make information sharing part of their practice seem to be practicing both in quadrant C as well as quadrant A. This is also true of collaborations where a social worker is working with another staff member to perceive a student or family situation “with fresh eyes” using a psychosocial and ecological view. While the immediate goal of such a task is to improve the fit between the staff member and the student, there may also be an extended positive impact on future interactions between that staff member and different students who present with similar issues. Again, this shows the potential for individually-oriented collaborations to ripple out into positive changes that improve the environment for all.

Contextual Supports and Barriers

The structural supports and barriers to collaborative practice described by the respondents mirror several of the factors inhibiting teamwork that are described elsewhere in the literature. Social workers in schools where they were part of regular team meetings seemed to have more opportunities to work with other staff both on individual student cases as well as ecological issues in their buildings, and this validates previous literature encouraging social workers to be a

part of more school-based committees and decision-making teams (J. N. Corbin, 2005; Hopson & Lawson, 2011; Phillippo & Stone, 2006). Almost all of the respondents seemed to agree that respectful, consistent, and decisive school leadership helped create a more collaborative environment by both recognizing the importance of multiple perspectives and holding staff accountable to the needs and decisions of the school community, and this finding reiterated the role of school principals and other administrators that has been described in other works (Bronstein, 2003; Bryk et al., 1999; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Staudt & Kerle, 1987)

Several studies have commented on how social workers' professional role development might inhibit more collaborative and ecological practice. Rigid professional identities, attachment to clinical roles, role confusion, and territoriality between various disciplines have all been described as barriers to more effective and respectful teamwork (Bronstein, 2003; Jones, 2006; Lawson, 1998; Orchard et al., 2005; Staudt, 1997). Surprisingly, none of the participants cited any of these concerns as barriers to their collaboration with others. The findings instead seem to align with results showing a minimal level of competition and role overlap between various school-based professions (Agresta, 2004). Many of the participants were especially effusive in their praise and gratitude for their colleagues who were school psychologists and guidance counselors. These results seem to contraindicate the literature's emphasis on addressing school social work's unclear or inflexible professional identity as a way to move towards greater collaborative and ecological practice. In other words, while role confusion and widely inconsistent professional expectations are indeed problems that need to be addressed within the field, they are not, in themselves, a road to the expanded vision of practice that has been promulgated by decades of literature. Instead, these findings suggest that the most influential factor affecting social work practice decisions is the level of relational trust between

school colleagues. Greater collaborative ecological practice may be best pursued by attending to the relational contexts of school social work and developing practice approaches that target the promotion of reliance and respect between social workers and other school professionals.

Building and Maintaining Relational Trust as a Context for Collaboration

The presence or absence of trust between social workers and their colleagues was a theme that emerged repeatedly among most of the respondents. The presence of trust was embodied in respect for the social worker's perspective, consistent accommodation of the social worker's requests and recommendations, willingness to seek the social worker's assistance, and confidence that the social worker would be both emotionally validating and practically helpful. In contrast, the absence of trust seemed evident in instances where the social worker's motivations were questioned, recommendations for change in practice or service were unheeded (and sometimes outright rejected), and the social worker's perspective on students and families was seen as coddling students, encouraging disruptive behavior, or capitulating to the demands of parents.

The responses gathered seem to indicate that in the context of greater relational trust, social workers seem more able to put forward a psychosocial and critical ecological perspective. Ecological changes required the willingness of other staff to reflect critically on their attitudes and practices, and without a firm foundation of trust and mutual goodwill, social workers seemed to encounter difficulties in fostering any sort of change in the approaches of their colleagues or schools. Some of the respondents even seemed increasingly frustrated and fatigued by the resistance they frequently encountered, and this frustration seemed compounded by social workers' vigilant efforts to maintain positive regard towards even their most obstinate colleagues. The presence of secure, trusting relationships between school professionals seems to serve as a

endurable context where difficult conversations about ineffective practice and services can be had fruitfully. In other words, once social workers are “known” in their schools, they seem to move more freely between social circles among the staff and more able to enlist their colleagues’ support for changes in the classroom and the system. Trust also seems to mediate the kinds of contributions social workers make in formal meetings and how effectively they are received by other staff members. This finding aligns with literature suggesting that social trust and professional community are the building blocks for the capacity of organizations to reflect critically on their own structures and practices (Bryk et al., 1999; Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

The reports given by the social workers in this study did not include descriptions of how racial and ethnic differences among staff members may be influencing the level of collaboration and trust in schools. This may reflect a limitation of this sample in that the racial composition of the staff in the schools represented in the study is overwhelmingly white (91.2%, from Massachusetts Department of Education public data). This may also reflect a limitation of the racial identities of the participants themselves, only one of whom identified as a person of color. Some literature has suggested that higher levels of racial and ethnic diversity among the staff may inhibit the formation of professional trust in schools (Bryk et al., 1999). Future study of school social worker collaboration in more diverse staff settings may help to investigate this idea.

Many respondents stressed that a new social worker does not simply walk into a school building and enjoy the benefits of trust immediately. Trust is earned through consistent, competent, and respectful collaborative exchanges between social workers and school staff—especially with teachers. The respondents’ views on how trust is earned seemed consistent with some of the recommendations found in the literature: adopting a flexible role that supports students in whatever ways are called for, giving priority to the educational goals of teachers and

administrators, and framing services in terms of benefitting students and increasing their ability to access learning (Bronstein & Abramson, 2003; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Garrett, 2006). One respondent was not assigned to a particular school but worked throughout her district—she nevertheless described how she had become trusted by schools to manage conflict between families and teachers due to her record of successful mediations and high degree of role flexibility. Among the others, some of the respondents seemed to be enjoying a high degree of social trust that had been developed from many years of practice in their buildings, while others seemed to still be building more trust and found themselves frequently frustrated by some of their colleagues.

The importance of building initial trust between the social worker and her colleagues raises a question: how might school social workers be adjusting their practice choices in order to develop more positive rapport with teachers? Several respondents discussed how they often selectively chose what to issues to raise with certain teachers and what to leave out in their consultations for worry that teachers might respond defensively and be unwilling to work with the social worker in the future. Newly established social workers might be especially vulnerable to the vicissitudes of staff reaction to their recommendations, and this may predispose some to adopt a more clinical student-level view rather than attempting the relationally taxing work of critical ecological change.

This possibility points to an alternative explanation for the prevalence of individual- and family-oriented casework approaches in school social work. Social workers may be engaging in more student-focused clinical work in order to foster greater trust between themselves and their colleagues. The respondents commonly reported that they were almost universally expected by their colleagues to contribute their clinical skills and knowledge to any collaborative situation,

and other authors have also discussed the common view shared by administrators and school staff members that the school social worker exists to manage mental health crises, provide emotional support for students in difficult circumstances, and develop intervention plans for individuals (Allen-Meares, 2007; Bronstein & Abramson, 2003; Bye et al., 2009; Garrett & Barretta-Herman, 1995). Social workers may be fulfilling these clinical casework expectations in order to be perceived as helpful, competent, and supportive to their colleagues, thereby building greater trust. This may be leading many social workers to focus on the needs and problems of individual students rather than pointing out issues with the building's environment and services that might threaten established practices and staff mindsets (perhaps eroding trust).

Some school social workers may be in an undesirable position: a social worker must earn the trust of staff members in order to develop the social and political capital to encourage positive changes in the school ecology, but to earn this trust social workers may need to fulfill institutional expectations that limit the scope of their practice to changing student behavior rather than affecting the system at large. Indeed, in the effort to be perceived as helpful and trustworthy, social workers may be sacrificing their ideal practices and theoretical perspectives.

However, some of the responses also seemed to indicate that the presence of regular formal collaborative meetings may help to mitigate the potential loss of trust that can occur if social workers are found to be too assertive or critical at first. Many of the respondents said that they found their work most effective when their building administrators were able to hold other staff accountable to intervention plans and recommendations that had been developed in team meetings and committees. Some social workers said that their administrators actively sought out their views on the school system and how to make systemic changes. And others also reported that they first began to build trust at school by seeking out staff members who were most

amenable to critical and ecological perspectives and, through those collaborations, gained a reputation as a helpful, intelligent colleague. These responses show that the presence of facilitating structures (such as regular collaborative meetings) and supportive staff members can help a social worker gain and maintain trust more quickly. Effective school leaders who are open to critical perspectives and organizational learning also seem to foster the social worker's standing as an ecological change agent and buffer her against the tides of rising and falling trust among other staff members. This is not to say that trust is irrelevant when school leadership is effective – rather, effective administration seems to give social workers the initial social confidence necessary to demonstrate to school staff that they have much more to offer than simply individual therapy services to students. These findings seem to support literature recommending that school social workers advocate for more interdisciplinary teams and formal meetings as a way to create opportunities for ecological practice (Hopson & Lawson, 2011).

This is also not to suggest that school social workers who practice primarily in direct clinical service for individual students, groups, and families are not also having a positive effect in their buildings. As noted previously, even seemingly simple consultations with teachers may have the effect of lessening staff vulnerability and isolation and improve the sense of professional community throughout the system (Bryk et al., 1999). I do mean to interrupt a common narrative in the school social work literature that seems to throw the gauntlet of collaborative ecological practice squarely at the feet of overwhelmed practitioners instead of endeavoring to examine the contextual factors that are influencing social work service choices. Ironically, some school social work researchers who have called for social workers to practice more ecologically seem to have themselves neglected the ecological situation of the social

workers they hope to change. I offer this grounded qualitative analysis to reintroduce the voices and contexts of school social workers to the literature that is purportedly about them.

Hypotheses for Future Research

As a qualitative analysis, this study sought to explore the phenomena of school social work collaboration as it is already occurring in schools today. This study is not meant to suggest authoritative recommendations for school social work practice, but it does point to the following hypotheses about interdisciplinary collaboration and critical ecological school social work practice. These hypotheses are offered with the understanding that they require further study, validation, and clarification:

1. Greater relational trust between social workers and school colleagues is associated with more time devoted to interdisciplinary collaboration in formal or informal settings.

2. Greater trust between school social workers and their colleagues (especially teachers) is developed through social work services that promote educational goals such as improved student attendance, increased student engagement in learning, decreased disruptive student behaviors, and better identification of students with unmet learning or social needs. These goals of initial trust-building tend to be individual- and family-oriented rather than systems-oriented.

3. Social workers may be disinclined from pressing for environmental change in classrooms or the school system because it may cause them to lose the trust of colleagues and be perceived as unhelpful or having ulterior motives contrary to academic achievement.

4. Social workers who find their position in schools precarious may have difficulty maintaining a critical ecological perspective until they have attained greater relational and institutional security.

5. The presence of formal collaborative opportunities where school environmental issues are discussed can help facilitate social workers' efforts towards critical ecological practice, even in situations where levels of trust are not ideal.

6. Administrators and other colleagues who value a systems-oriented perspective who are open to examining issues with existing services and programs buffer the social worker against the potential loss of trust that can occur with critical practice.

7. Social workers who successfully advocate for more interdisciplinary meetings and teams where they are included may be able to engage in more ecological practice while also maintaining relational trust with staff.

8. Social workers who demonstrate that ecological interventions ultimately benefit student learning can enhance their relational trust with staff, but this requires the cooperation of invested colleagues.

I reiterate that these hypotheses are not offered as definitive statements on school social work practice but rather are ideas which need validation and confirmation in broader cross-sectional and longitudinal studies of school social work tasks and contexts.

Implications for School Social Work Scholarship

As I have noted before, this study is not designed to yield implications and suggestions for school social workers. My goal was to describe school social work collaborative practice as comprehensively as possible given my research constraints. However, from the results discussed above, some research implications have emerged for our field's scholarship: 1) the field needs more descriptive studies that examine existing collaborative practice rather than new service programs and practice models; and 2) social work scholarship needs to reach audiences outside of the discipline. Since we see that the role of administrators and teachers is so important to the

ability of school social workers to engage in critical practice, the social work research community should also make a greater effort to collaborate with colleagues in education and educational policy fields. This may also include publishing versions of important findings in social work research in the educational and school leadership literature.

When articles present the lack of systems-oriented interventions as a problem without also presenting contextualizing theories for why this is occurring, they seem to imply that these are ineffective choices being made by bad social workers. The practice literature sometimes seems cruelly ignorant of the interpersonal realities that affect the everyday decisions made by school social workers. Do I bring this up with this person, or not? I could say this, but how will it be taken? Will she want to talk to me again? These questions precede every collaborative intervention in which social workers attempt to initiate change in classrooms and schools, but their answers are not simply a function of professional values or adequate practice knowledge. They seem to require an appreciation of the relational context of interdisciplinary practice. School social workers do not seem to need more abstract academic reminders of how sorely their work falls short of social work ideals—rather, scholarship should begin with grounded, ecological descriptions of school social work and lead to encouragement and recommendations for all parties involved in determining what social workers do and how they do it.

Conclusion

In a political climate of heightened expectations coupled with scarce resources, the practice decisions of school social workers seem to carry ever-increasing stakes for their students, their schools, and the profession itself. Several of the social workers I spoke to were acutely aware of the challenges facing the educational system. One described her own recognition that she is not able to meet all the demands of the school she serves:

And you know- the sad thing I'd say, just parenthetically, is that I think kids come to school less able to manage the social aspect of school. Even kids who I'd say are typical kids who've had some nice opportunities to do that learning. But I think because families are smaller and all sorts of reasons, kids come in and really have trouble with really the basics around negotiating things on the playground- and so the need for that preventive work seems even bigger than it probably was ten years ago for typically kids. But we're really not able to address that in the way we'd like to do. So anyway- that's a shame. (P5, March 28, 2012)

For all their differences, educators and social workers seem to share an understanding that they operate in flawed bureaucracies serving populations with intensifying needs. I find that there is a certain courage in the tenacity of those working in schools to nevertheless contribute what they can and aim for the best possible outcomes. Social workers, in particular, are trained to see the system-wide issues facing schools, but they nevertheless must put aside feelings of futility and inadequacy to address what is workable. In such a demanding environment, it seems expectable that social workers will make practice choices that increase the connections of mutual trust and respect with their coworkers from other fields. Some fortunately succeed, while others face ongoing struggles to be taken seriously and trusted. In any case, the academic work that grounds our field needs to recognize the pressure and frustrations experienced by practitioners. Whether social workers pursue clinical sessions with individuals or systems-changing collaborations with staff, we require an adequate inventory of the contextual factors that drive practice decisions. One respondent shared her own philosophy of critical ecological social work practice:

I think that's what social work is... We figure out where are people feeling that the demands are exceeding their capacity, how is that affecting them- whether it's because of a system or because of an interpersonal- you know- intrinsic issues. You know, figuring out what that is. And then figuring out, okay, now how do we go about kinda moving forward and gathering more information, getting rid of some of our baggage, working through it, labeling it, thinking it- you know- moving forward. I think that's what we do.

(P11, April 6, 2012)

Only by taking stock of places in our profession where practice demands are exceeding contextual capacities can we craft recommendations that will “make sense” to social workers working in school hallways, playgrounds, lunchrooms, classrooms, and sometimes even their own offices. The work of positive ecological change in schools is a massive project with national consequences, but as this study demonstrates, it is not one that needs to be undertaken alone. By intentionally building relational trust with their colleagues, social workers can lay down the foundations for the kinds of critical and reflective conversations, workgroups, and school teams that change the hearts and minds of those adults who determine so much of the social and emotional weather of schools and the children who learn and play in them.

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APPENDIX A: Informed Consent Letter and Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Alex Kim and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research study to learn more about the roles and values that school social workers practice in their jobs. I am also interested in how school social workers both work independently as well as collaboratively with other school staff in order to practice their roles and values. The data gathered for this study may be used for publication and presentation.

I am seeking social workers who are employed in a school setting for this study. This includes school social workers serving one or multiple sites in a public school district, as well as adjustment counselors, guidance counselors, and other special education staff who have graduate social work credentials, training, and licensure. If you decide to participate, I will interview you for a period of 30-40 minutes. The interview will be digitally recorded and later transcribed. If someone other than myself transcribes or analyzes the interview, they will sign a confidentiality agreement first.

This research is about your professional practices, roles, and values. The interview may bring out some difficult feelings and frustrations about your job, your work environment, and your own sense of professional ethics and values and how they might be in conflict. This may lead to increased anxiety for some participants, but the risk is low. However, I expect that many participants will enjoy the opportunity to talk about their work in a low-pressure environment and with another social worker. You may gain satisfaction from simply telling your story, as well as new professional insights about how to practice more effectively or collaboratively. Eventually, the research may lead to more comprehensive approaches to school social work that can improve student outcomes and overall job satisfaction among your colleagues. **There will be no monetary compensation for participation in the study.**

Your participation in the study will be kept as confidential as possible. Depending on where we agree to meet, some colleagues may deduce that by meeting with me you have participated in the study. Audio files and transcripts will be stored electronically and password-protected. Only I will possess knowledge of which file corresponds to which research participant. If other transcribers process the audio file, they will first sign a confidentiality agreement. Any personal information will be removed from the transcript. When the data is analyzed and presented, results will be shown so that no single person's response will be highlighted by itself. If certain quotes are used to convey a point, any details will be disguised to prevent a reader from deducing your identity. My research advisor, a Smith College faculty member, will also have access to the data but only after identifiable information has been removed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time during your participation. If you do withdraw, all materials and documents pertaining to your

participation will be destroyed or deleted. You may also withdraw from the study after you have given an interview – in such an event, audio files and transcripts of your interview will be destroyed and any portion of the study that uses comments you made will be removed. It will not be possible to withdraw after May 1, 2012. **If you wish to withdraw, please contact me as soon as possible via email at akim@smith.edu.** If you have any concerns about your rights or any aspect of the study, please contact me or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at 413-585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Researcher signature: _____ Date: _____
Alex J Kim

Participant signature: _____ Date: _____

printed name: _____

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. I look forward to being able to share the results with you. If you would like a copy of the completed thesis project, please leave your email address with me so that I can send you an electronic copy of the thesis once it is complete.

Participant email address: _____
(for electronic copy of thesis)

Please retain a copy of this Informed Consent Letter for your records. If you have any questions about the study, your participation, or if you would like to withdraw from the study, please do not hesitate to contact me:

Alex Kim
Email: akim@smith.edu

APPENDIX B: Recruitment Email

Hello!

My name is Alex Kim and I am a student at Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton. I am conducting a research study about the ways that social workers collaborate with teachers, administrators, and other professionals in schools in order to help students achieve.

This study would involve completing a brief survey and a 30-minute interview. Your responses and interview will be kept anonymous and completely confidential. I would be glad to meet participants at their office or another public location of their choosing.

This study is open to those who:

- have a graduate-level social work degree (MSW or equivalent); and
- work primarily as counselors, social workers, special education team members, or other student support roles within a school setting.

If you meet the requirements listed above and would like to participate, or if you have any questions, please reply to this email at xxxx@smith.edu or call me at xxx-xxx-xxxx (cell).

If you cannot participate, please consider referring colleagues or personal contacts who may be interested – I would be happy to reach out to anyone who you recommend.

I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Alex Kim
MSW Candidate, 2012
Smith College School for Social Work

APPENDIX C: Participant Information Survey

- 1) What is your gender? _____
- 2) What is your age group?
☐ 18-24 ☐ 25-34 ☐ 35-44 ☐ 45-54 ☐ 55-64 ☐ 65 and over
- 3) How do you identify your race or ethnicity? (*check all that apply*)
☐ African-American ☐ Asian-American/Pacific Islander
☐ Latino/a or Hispanic ☐ Multiracial or mixed-race
☐ Native American ☐ White/Caucasian
- 4) What professional degrees and credentials do you possess? (*check all that apply*)
☐ MSW or equivalent ☐ LCSW
☐ LICSW ☐ Specialization or certificate in school social work
☐ School or guidance counseling
☐ Marriage and family therapy
☐ Clinical psychology or counseling psychology
☐ Teaching
☐ School administration or policy
☐ Other: _____
- 5) How many years have you practiced in your current position? _____ years
- 6) How many years have you practiced as a social worker in schools? _____ years
- 7) How many years have you practiced as a social worker? _____ years
- 8) What other school staff roles have you been employed in, if any? (*check all that apply*)
☐ Teacher ☐ Teacher aide/paraprofessional
☐ Guidance counselor ☐ School administrator (principal, VP, dean, etc.)
☐ District administrator ☐ Nurse
☐ Other: _____
- 9) What level of students do you work with? (*check all that apply*)
☐ Preschool ☐ K-5 (elementary)
☐ 6-8 (middle/junior high) ☐ 9-12 (high school)
- 10) How many different schools do you work with? _____
- 11) About how many children make up your average yearly caseload? _____

APPENDIX D: Interview Guide

1. To start off, could you please tell me about your role at your school(s)?

How do you decide who to work with?

How do you decide what to work on in a given day?

Who do you think of as your “clients”?

How would you describe the overall goals of the work you do?

Do you feel like others share your goals for the school?

What sorts of work do you do with individual students and families?

What sorts of work do you do with groups of students?

What sorts of work do you do that affects many students at once (for example, an entire grade level of the entire school)?

2. In what ways do you work with other members of the school staff, such as teachers, administrators, guidance, and so on?

What kinds of things do you do that involve other staff members?

--Observations? Consultation? Conferences? Joint projects? Committees?

What are the benefits of working with other staff members?

What challenges have you encountered when working with other staff members?

What are the conversations you have with other staff (e.g. teachers, administration) like?

Do you feel that other staff members' expectations of you are realistic?

3. I'd like to talk some more about situations where you consult and work with other staff members. When you do decide to reach out to another staff members, what kinds of goals do you have in mind?

What do you hope to accomplish or gain by working with other staff members that would not be possible or as meaningful doing on your own?

How does working with other staff members enhance what you're doing?

How do you decide whether or not you should collaborate with another staff member?

Could you describe instances in which collaboration with other staff members resulted in a better outcome for a student or a group of students?

Could you describe an instance in which collaboration with others resulted in something that benefitted multiple groups within the school (such as multiple classes, multiple grades, other staff, or even the school as a whole)?

Could you describe an instance in which collaboration with other staff resulted in an outcome that benefitted people or groups outside the school?

4. What do you feel would make working with other school staff more effective?

What changes at your school might make collaboration with other staff members more likely and more helpful?

Is there anything you feel your colleagues should know or be taught about your role that would make collaboration more effective?

How do you feel your own training or learning has prepared you for working with other school staff? What might you change?

APPENDIX E: Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 6, 2012

Dear Alex,

The requested revisions to your Human Subjects Review application have been reviewed and are approved.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck on your research project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'David L. Burton'.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Elaine Kersten, Research Advisor